

Policy Forum 00-07B: North Korea: Torn Between Two Logical Decisions, Regime Maintenance or Economic Survival?

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By Mi-kyoung Kim, Ph.D.

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I. Introduction

This contribution is by Mi-kyoung Kim, PhD, a policy advisor to North Korean Aid Programs for World Vision Korea. Kim argues that perceptions of the DPRK and its leader Kim Jong-il prior to the recent diplomatic flurry were based on limited information. Kim also argues that it has become clear that the DPRK regime is simultaneously pursuing two policies, that of strengthening international ties and that of internal regime maintenance, but does not have the resources to do both well.

II. Essay by Mi-kyoung Kim, Ph.D.

"North Korea: Torn Between Two Logical Decisions, Regime Maintenance or Economic Survival?"

I. Coping with the Post-Summit Aftershock: Going Beyond the Fictional Speculations on North Korea

When North Korea remained as the "never-never land" of the world, the job of the North Korean observer was a piece of cake, in retrospect. The job was easy not because the country was in unison enough to study, but because nobody really knew what was going on within the world's most secluded society. North Korean observers claimed to see whatever they wanted to see, and got away with whatever they said about it. Access to the hermit kingdom was so limited that any speculation could be made, and yet no speculation was credible enough to be taken seriously. Anecdotes from the rare visits to North Korea were often blown to be the truths about the country, and Pyongyang observers had to teach themselves how to read between the lines of the Communist Party's propagandized press release. The way we learned about the northern half of the Korean peninsula was a telling reminder of the story of blind men each claiming to know what an elephant really looks like only by touching different parts of its body. North Korea was a jigsaw puzzle with too many missing pieces. We searched hard to find those pieces, but often to no avail.

The changing winds surrounding the Korean peninsula have not been helpful for the students of North Korea as of yet. We are still in the middle of a labyrinth even though the door of the hermit kingdom has been cracked open to the outside world. In the midst of the quick rapids of rapprochement, our biggest task now is to discern the handful facts from piles of fictional speculations on the system. We have lived with enough of imaginary claims on North Korea that its leader, Kim Jong-il, sarcastically charged that "North Korean specialists are nothing but phonies" during his meeting with the South Korean media delegation visiting Pyongyang last July. Since his international debut with flying colors, Kim Jong-il himself has proved how utterly distorted our views

of him have been. We have transformed him from a social recluse, movie mania, alcoholic and womanizer into "a practical and rational leader" whom Madeline Albright commanded as "a man I can do business with" after her encounter with him in Pyongyang last October.

The June summit talks between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il was a bench-marking event, but the aftershock from the Copernican revolution in the two arch-enemies' hostile relations is far from being settled any time soon. Many contradictory signals about North Korea's present intentions and its future trajectory flicker, and they can be boiled down to the regime's cautious pursuit of a double track policy differentiating domestic politics from international relations.

II. North Korea's Double Track Policy: Warming International Relations vs. Chilling Domestic Control

International relations is one area that North Korea seems to be definitely changing toward more openness. Pyongyang has been aggressively approaching the western block countries to establish its ties with them. For instance, it has found Italy, the Philippines, Canada and Australia as new diplomatic partners. Other countries, such as Britain, New Zealand, Spain and Germany, are testing the waters on normalizing relations with Pyongyang. The Netherlands and Belgium have pledged their willingness to mend ties with the North as well. Despite the series of ups-and-downs stretching over more than a decade, Pyongyang has been trying to normalize its relations with the two most powerful economies of the world: the U.S. and Japan.

In spite of the occasional precariousness, the two Koreas have come to comfortable terms with each other. The separated families of the North and South are reuniting for the second time around at the end of November. Seoul and Pyongyang have signed the first economic agreement ironing out the details for the cross border trade. The inter-Korean railway project has begun in the South, and defense ministers of the two regimes held talks last October. Civilian exchanges have gained such speed that the first inter-Korean Labor Forum is going to be held in Beijing in December, and women leaders of the two societies will get together to discuss peaceful reunification and disarmament next March after a seven-year hiatus since their first meeting in 1993. In the areas of international relations and inter-Korean exchanges, Pyongyang's behaviors strongly indicate tangible changes. However, we need to pause here and ask ourselves whether North Korean society is really changing accordingly.

Kim Dae-jung government's "sunshine policy" aims to induce voluntary changes of North Korea, and it seems to have yielded substantial success by holding inter-Korea summit talks in Pyongyang and carrying out the subsequent working-level meetings afterwards. However, there exist ample evidence suggesting that North Korea's domestic politics is the doldrums evading the sweeping winds of change. The recent changes may have affected North Korea's top ruling class in the assessment of their survival strategies, but we have good reasons to believe that the absolute majority of North Korean people are still kept in the dark.

Kim Jong-il's North Korea maintains its closed system by tightly isolating its masses from "the evil outside forces" by indoctrinating them with Juche ideology. Juche ideology is North Korea's unique system of beliefs combining indigenous worldviews such as Confucianism and nationalism with socialism. The logic of Juche ideology is so rigorous that it has become a quasi-religion of the society. The North Korean masses are taught to internalize the beliefs that their country is "the paradise" of the world and their great leader, Kim Il-sung, is living the eternal life since his death in 1995. Juche ideology not only dictates the political sphere of the society, but it permeates into the daily life of its people. "From cradle to grave," North Koreans are thoroughly indoctrinated by the system's unique ideology, and the masses have very little reason to believe otherwise. To the eyes of North Korean people, for instance, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's visit to the North may

well be seen as his paying tribute to their "dear leader," Kim Jong-il, and so is the visit by the US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright. People see what they want to see and how they are taught to see in the absence of alternative pedagogy.

The atmospherics of détente on the peninsula seem to have failed to reach North Koreans, and the Pyongyang regime is exerting its best to tightly control its masses. For instance, North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported late last October that Kim Jong-il is going to push harder to build self-reliant national economy without the help of outside economic assistance. Given the dire shortage of foreign capital, this was interpreted as nothing but an empty slogan. But this line of propaganda still reveals Pyongyang's determination to control its people with the fake illusions of self-reliance. Another evidence supporting no change in North Korea's domestic politics comes from Pyongyang's accusation of Seoul's military provocation in the Yellow Sea early November. KCNA asserted that "We cannot but construe this as a deliberate attempt by South Korea's military to reverse the amicable situation....Incidents like this are reminiscent of the tense situation that led to the 'West Sea incident' in June last year." The South Korean Defense Ministry denied Pyongyang's charges in its response. The atmospherics of military confrontation between the North and South in this era of détente seems to be another means to control North Korean people. The message is that the war still continues on the peninsula and the people of the North should not let their guard down. The sense of vulnerability over the most basic human needs, i.e., physical security, consolidates the internal cohesion no matter how challenging the daily existence can be within.

The Pyongyang regime is walking on thin ice, balancing the two tasks of opening up to the outside and closing down inside. The tragic irony of this balancing act is that they can let go of neither of the two for the sake of the regime's survival. Without the food to feed its hungry people, the regime's basic governing legitimacy gets seriously challenged. The testimonies of North Korean refugees at the border areas of China and Russia clearly suggest that North Korean people have reached their limit in enduring the serious deprivation of basic human needs. And yet, the fresh air of change coming in from outside can shake up the closed system. North Korea is torn between the two pressing and contradictory agendas: economic survival and regime maintenance. Intriguingly enough, these two pressing agendas are not mutually exclusive, and they share a substantial overlap with each other instead. How is Pyongyang going to factor out these two overlaps for its own benefits, and where is it headed now?

III. Pyongyang's Choice: In Search of the Least Bad Alternative

The inconvenient overlap between openness for the sake of economic survival and domestic control for the purpose of regime maintenance does not grant North Korea the best choice among various scenarios. Following is the reason why. There exist three qualifiers of these two domains: Pyongyang's normalization of diplomatic ties with the west (the U.S. and Japan in particular), economic assistance from the western bloc, and Pyongyang's grip to its military capacity. These three qualifiers are causally related, but the causal arrows do not point in one direction. In other words, economic survival is the imperative for regime maintenance. And, economic survival depends on the assistance and aid from the western bloc. Obtaining economic assistance and aid from the West demands Pyongyang's normalization of diplomatic ties with them. But diplomatic normalization often requires Pyongyang's concessions in its military programs. The military capacity of North Korea, however, has been its one and only lever in negotiations with the western bloc. The abandonment of its military capability in order to secure badly needed economic aid would leave Pyongyang with no bargaining chip. Therefore, the question is whether the North would be willing to make compromises with its military capacity for the sake of economic survival. This very question sums up Pyongyang's dilemma, and Kim Jong-il's government will have to choose their policy

direction before long because time is not on their side.

Pyongyang's reality check since the 1995 massive famine claiming 2.5 million lives was threatening enough to drive the proud nationalist government to request for emergency aid to the international community. From June of 1995 until July of 2000, the total amount of international aid to North Korea has reached \$1,561,780,000, and Seoul has borne 27 percent of the total amount of \$425,280,000 during the same period. Despite the emergency transfusion of aid and humanitarian assistance, North Korean food security seems to be far from getting resolved in the foreseeable future. North Korea will need to import 1,865,000 tons of cereals between November, 2000 and October, 2001 in order to secure the minimum food supply. This perennial shortage of food is caused by multiple factors such as erosion of land soil, severe shortage of energy, severe drought, typhoons, and crumbling infrastructure. The World Food Program reports that more than 16 percent of North Korean children are suffering from severe malnutrition and this statistic ranks North Korea as one of the worst in the world. It is so obvious that North Korea does not have a lot of choices when it comes down to economic survival and the support of international community is the determining variable in doing so.

On the other hand, however, Kim Jong-il's North Korea has been shrewdly using its military threat as an effective bargaining chip. Kim's leadership is founded on "the barrel of gun," and its "brinkmanship diplomacy" comes from the destructive power of militarism that will not only demolish the regime itself, but the surrounding powers as well. It has been Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction that have brought the West to the bargaining table with them. Pyongyang has proved itself as nobody's game with arsenals in its hands.

Despite the effectiveness of military capability in reminding the world of its own sovereign power, the pressing needs to maintain the system and to secure economic aid will force Pyongyang to make concessions to the western partners. A longitudinal analysis of North Korea's policy behaviors, since its founding moment in 1948 until 1985 when the revolutionary Joint Venture Law was enacted, shows that economic reality has been superceding its political rhetoric. For instance, North Korea actively ventured out to Third World countries and the West as its trading partners when the Sino-USSR relationship went sour in the 1970s. The regime enacted the Joint Venture Law when the trade deficit was running in deep red in the early 1980s. Economic reality supercedes all of the political rhetoric even in the hermit kingdom, and it will continue to do so.

The best of both worlds (i.e., economic survival and regime maintenance) will be far beyond its reach. In other words, Pyongyang cannot keep on benefiting from the international aid and normalization of diplomatic ties without making concessions to certain vital security issues such as nuclear inspection and missile development. New Zealand, for instance, has offered its willingness to work with the North on nuclear safety program while testing the waters in normalizing its diplomatic ties with Pyongyang. The missile talks between the U.S. and the North held in Malaysia last October clearly suggest that the North is still weighing the pros and cons between which direction to go. And yet, Pyongyang knows all too well that the endorsement of the U.S. is so crucial for its access to the badly needed hard currency from the World Bank and Asia Development Bank.

In wrapping up, let me argue that the ruling elite of Pyongyang has come a long way in its dealings with Seoul and the outside world. The elite has "crossed the bridge of no return." Even though the North Korean masses are still kept in the dark, the ruling elite knows all too well that they will either sink or swim given the harsh realities the regime is facing. Instead of sinking, they would choose to stay afloat with a belittled ego. Every badge we earn has a price tag attached to it, and the homework for the Pyongyang leadership is to figure out how to minimize the price for their survival. Like everybody else, they cannot "have their cake and eat it, too."

1 The views expressed here are strictly personal and do not represent the opinion of World Vision Korea.

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III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@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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