



Policy Forum 00-06C: North Korea's Kim, Jong-WHO?



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North Korea's Kim, Jong-WHO?

By William J. Taylor

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I. Introduction

This is the third essay examining the question of the DPRK's past behavior in the light of the recently completed ROK-DPRK summit. This essay was contributed by William J. Taylor, Senior Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Taylor examines the psychological profiles that have been constructed and propagated over the years by analysts, and by the DPRK itself, to demonstrate that those outside the DPRK do not know much about its leadership or its intentions. Taylor argues that the DPRK leadership may have bought into Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, providing other countries with an opportunity to normalize relations that should not be squandered.

II. Essay by William J. Taylor

"North Korea's Kim, Jong-WHO?"

Recent statements by prominent statesman and scholars alike about DPRK motivations and intentions lead one to wonder. It was in my very first graduate-level seminar 37 years ago that the great Professor William Y. Elliott counseled his students to "Beware of single factor analysis," proceeding to explain that there is never a single factor that explains any major event in either domestic or international politics. To this day, I begin my Georgetown course on "The Roles of Force and Diplomacy in U.S. Foreign Policy" with the same observation.

In fact, we do not know much about why the DPRK under the leadership of Chairman Kim, Jong-il does anything beyond, of course, regime survival. We do not even know who Kim, Jong-il really is, despite the important service our Nobel Peace Prize Winner, the great President Kim, Dae-jung, has rendered us in "lifting the veil" briefly from Chairman Kim's face. Many of conservative political persuasion remain enmeshed in the disinformation web that our intelligence agencies spun for us in the Cold War "good old days" to create Kim, Jong-il's "profile." Your readers know that profile-- a reclusive, bon vivant living in his father's shadow, a binge drinker and womanizer with an enormous collection of porno films, an aspiring actor, and the person who personally ordered major terrorist attacks against South Korea.

Others, such as I, have at least considered alternative explanations (disinformation?) about Kim. Mine were provided in private sessions by his father, the late President Kim, Il-sung, by his personal counselor and confidant, Secretary Kim, Yong-sun, by his former professor at Kim, Il-sung University, Hwang, Jong-yop (before he defected), and by many other senior DPRK civilian and military officials during hundreds of hours of meetings during my four, week-long visits to North Korea. That profile? A serious, young man who spent countless thousands of hours at his father's knee learning leadership responsibilities he would inherit under the DPRK system of hereditary succession ; a brilliant student who reclused himself to read serious works about history of the Korean people, history of China, history of Russia, history of the Japanese occupation, history of imperialism in Asia, Marxism-Leninism, origins of The Juche Idea and military theory; an analytical thinker capable of making tough decisions fast; a young "Dear Leader" who devoted countless hours to travel around his country giving "on-the-spot guidance" to his people.

What a contrast in profiles! Suppose there were some accuracy in both profiles. Suppose that Kim, Jong-il went through rapid personal maturation (i.e. "grew up fast") beginning with the unexpected death of his Father, The Great Leader, six years ago and with the realization that HE was suddenly responsible for leading his country at the time of the nuclear crisis in the spring and summer 1994, followed by Mother Nature's disastrous, alternating floods and droughts, compounding the problems of a failing economy. Suppose that he has realized over the past six years why his country is an isle of poverty in a Northeast Asian sea of prosperity. Suppose that he and his colleagues now are willing to risk the hopefully controllable infection of capitalism as the only realistic means of preserving the last vestiges of "Juche" (self-reliance), the philosophical cornerstone of their political system. Suppose that Chairman Kim decided to turn his acting talents into an international sales campaign, with the final rehearsal in Beijing last April and his debut at the June N-S Summit. Certainly, he has been getting rave reviews. Can't wait to read Secretary Albright's review next week.

Why the new North Korean "charm offensive?" Why does the DPRK leadership think what it thinks? Say what it says? Do what it does? Read Juche philosophy as I have (partially because there is nothing else to do at night in Pyongyang and my villa was always conveniently stocked with the writings of The Great Leader and Dear Leader--in several languages). Consider that the Workers Party has its own disinformation requirements, both domestically and internationally. Ponder the idea that the DPRK leadership just might be beginning to believe the fundamental premises of Kim, Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, especially those which seek peaceful coexistence rather than the demise of the DPRK regime. Suppose the DPRK military leadership finally understands that, despite the terrible damage its missiles and other delivery systems armed with weapons of mass destruction could inflict on South Korea and Japan, a war started for any reason would lead to its utter destruction fast by the ROK-US Combined Forces Command. Suppose...?

The risks of not engaging Pyongyang remain great. As Kim, Dae-jung reiterated to me on July 7, "The Sunshine policy is not just the best alternative policy, it is the only sane and relatively safe policy." Let's proceed fast to normalize relations with North Korea, while keeping our powder dry. Above all, let's continue work with our allies and friends to accelerate establishment of a complex of political-military, economic and social relationships that help prevent high tensions on the Korean peninsula which could lead to war by accident or miscalculation--the ways in which most wars have started.

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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