Policy Forum 08-088: Neo-Cons in Pyongyang

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By Leonid Petrov

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I. Introduction

Leonid Petrov, Research Associate at the Australian National University, writes, "As for North Korea's erratic behaviour in rejecting the nuclear sampling and verification process, again it is the conservative mood that dominates today's Pyongyang... Every time when Washington reneged on its promises given at the Six Party Talks it would undermine the power of the liberal group in Pyongyang."

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II. Article by Leonid Petrov

- "Neo-Cons in Pyongyang"
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These days North Korea is heading to a major retreat, back to military Communism with only some elements of market economy which are necessary to keep the country afloat. The economic policy of partial liberalization, which started on July 1, 2002, and waned in mid-2005, is now a history. The old patterns of central economic planning, public distribution system, and strictly controlled market activity are back in place.

This might be surprising to those who expected from North Korea to open up and become a transitional economy but its current economic policy attests to the contrary. We do not know whether this retreat had been planned from the start, but already in 2004 the North Korean authorities openly talked about it.

Kim Jong-il's ill health became apparent in October 2007 during the summit with Roh Moo-hyun. In November-December 2007, active anti-market actions were launched in North Korea. It was the time when Chang Sun-taek, Kim's brother in law, was promoted to the newly-recreated post of first vice-director of the Korean Workers' Party, with oversight responsibility for the police, judiciary, and other areas of internal security. He was sent to the border area with China to clean it up from smugglers and speculators. Then special instructions tightened the regulations relevant to Farmers' Markets elsewhere in the country.

This trend continued in early and mid-2008 and led to the conclusion that a conservative group in the DPRK leadership became victorious. In this, North Korea simply mirrored South Korea, where a new conservative government of President Lee Myung-bak came to power the same year.

Conservatives in the North have already faced some signs of public unrest and discontent (a demonstration of market traders in Cheongjin in March and a family suicide in Onjin in June) but they played it well and managed to pacify the people. The killing of a South Korean tourist happened in July 2008 and, although was probably an incident, fit well into the general trend of cutting contacts with South Korea. Given the reality of collapsing inter-Korean cooperation, it is likely that North Korea will close the DMZ on Dec. 1. Kaesong Industrial Park will survive but stay effectively isolated from direct influence of the South.

Two main factors (the weakening or ill Kim Jong-il and the stubborn and uncooperative Lee Myung-bak) contribute to the recent downturn in inter-Korean relations. North Korea never had illusions regarding the "Sunshine Policy" of Lee's predecessors, understanding that its ultimate goal was to lure North Korea out of its shell. The South Koreans were not patient enough to wait until this policy would bear a larger fruit. Now the leading mood in both governments changed to the point that it becomes disruptive for peace and economic stability on the Korean Peninsula. Both governments drive the divided nation back to where it was before December 1991, when the Non-aggression and Denuclearization pacts were signed.

As for North Korea's erratic behaviour in rejecting the nuclear sampling and verification process, again it is the conservative mood that dominates today's Pyongyang. Most agreements which Kim Jong-il concluded with the US were hardly popular among the North Korean military. Every time when Washington reneged on its promises given at the Six Party Talks it would undermine the

power of the liberal group in Pyongyang.

I will not be surprised to learn that Kim Jong-il had a stroke last August after learning that US Congress refused to remove the DPRK from the list of terrorism-sponsoring states. Even now, despite in principle agreeing to go ahead with the denuclearisation plan, the North Korean military and the conservatives create as many obstacles to its realisation as they can.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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