



Policy Forum 10-036: North Korea: Unhappy Anniversaries



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North Korea: Unhappy Anniversaries

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By Aidan Foster-Carter

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I. Introduction

Aidan Foster-Carter, Honorary Senior Research Fellow in Sociology & Modern Korea at Leeds University, writes, "Hence while the precise nature of September's [WPK] meeting remains vague, like its exact date, it looks like a long overdue effort to restore a measure of due process to the Party. If this is in fact a full formal WPK congress, it would be the first since the Sixth Congress thirty years ago in October 1980. It was then that Kim Jong-il, hitherto veiled behind coded references to a mysterious 'Party Centre', was finally revealed in the flesh. The speculation is that this new meeting similarly will finally give the world a glimpse of the enigmatic Kim Jong-eun." This article appears by kind permission of NewNations.com, for whom it was written as June's monthly update on North Korea.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Aidan Foster-Carter

-“North Korea: Unhappy Anniversaries”

By Aidan Foster-Carter

June 2010 saw two major anniversaries on the Korean peninsula. On June 25 sixty years ago – Korean culture, like Chinese, traditionally attaches special significance to 60 year cycles – the Korean People’s Army (KPA) invaded the South across the then 38th Parallel, launching a bitter three-year civil and international war. North Korea still denies culpability, claiming it was repelling a Southern invasion; despite overwhelming evidence, now backed by Soviet archival evidence, that it was the aggressor. No less mendaciously, if rather contradictorily, Pyongyang nonetheless celebrates the July 27, 1953 Armistice – there is still no peace treaty – which ended open hostilities as a “brilliant victory in the Fatherland Liberation War;” even though this left the North bombed and napalmed to ruination. A Pyrrhic victory, indeed.

China still formally backs the North’s version, but this year some brave soul decided to take seriously the late Deng Xiaoping’s instruction to “Seek truth from facts.” In a lengthy spread marking the anniversary the International Herald Leader, an affiliate of Xinhua newsagency let the cat out of the bag. This featured interviews with Chinese historians telling the true story, and a timeline stating that “The North Korean military crossed the parallel on June 25 1950 and Seoul was taken in four days.” That naturally attracted comment in South Korea – whereupon the article rapidly vanished from the Web. Many Chinese now are openly critical of the DPRK, and embarrassed that Beijing continues to toe Pyongyang’s line.

North Korea itself sticks to the old tunes. On June 22 the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported, as usual at this season, what it headlined as “Revenge-vowing Meetings.” It is worth reading this in full, to grasp the authentic flavour of DPRK discourse in 2010:

Pyongyang, June 22 (KCNA) -- Youth and students and agricultural workers gathered in Susan-ri, Kangso District of Nampho City and in Sinchon County of South Hwanghae Province Tuesday to vow to take revenge upon the U.S. imperialists on the occasion of the "June 25, the day of the struggle against the U.S. imperialists".

The reporters and speakers at the meetings recalled that the U.S. imperialists brutally destroyed cities, villages, factories and farms and killed innocent civilians in the most barbarous way everywhere they set their foot during the war of aggression.

They also referred to the shuddering atrocities perpetrated by the U.S. imperialists in Susan-ri and Sinchon in the period of the temporary strategic retreat during the Korean war, denouncing the Yankees as a herd of wolves in human skin and the Koreans' sworn-enemy with whom they can not live under the same sky.

More than half a century have passed since the ceasefire but the U.S. imperialists remain unchanged in their true nature for aggression, they noted in hot blood, adding that the U.S. imperialists are working hard to ignite a new war on this land while linking the warship sinking case of the south Korean puppet navy to the DPRK in conspiracy with the Lee Myung Bak group of traitors.

They bitterly condemned the U.S. imperialists and the Lee group of traitors for totally negating the historic June 15 North-South Joint Declaration and openly holding in check its implementation, thereby pushing the inter-Korean relations to the worst phase.

If the U.S. imperialists intrude into the DPRK even an inch, all the servicepersons and

people will mercilessly wipe out the aggressors to give vent to the long-pent up grudge and accomplish the sacred cause of national reunification at all costs, they stressed. It is true that both sides committed atrocities during this terrible war. But it is also possible to seek peace and healing. Rhetoric like the above, by contrast, is clearly intended to whip up and fan the flames of hatred. A similar report a year ago characterised the Korean war as “an aggression war provoked by the US imperialists under the plan to stifle the DPRK in its cradle and an unprecedented war of massacre aimed at exterminating the Korean nation.”

A further KCNA item on June 24 purported to list the “Tremendous Damage Done to DPRK by US.” A number-free zone where the DPRK economy is concerned, KCNA with unusual precision computed a total of nearly 65 trillion dollars (US\$ 64,959,854 million, to be exact) for human and material losses inflicted from 1945 up to the present. Considering the state of US public finances, Kim Jong-il should not expect a cheque any time soon. There is also a degree of inflation; last time KCNA published such an exercise, in November 2003, the bill was a mere US\$ 43 trillion. One can only wonder what is the point of such grandstanding.

So savage a mood has torpedoed a second anniversary; one which should have been happier. On June 13 2000 South Korea’s then president, the veteran democrat Kim Dae-jung flew to Pyongyang for the first ever inter-Korean summit with the North’s leader, Kim Jong-il. On June 15 they signed a North-South Joint Declaration; Kim Dae-jung was awarded that year’s Nobel Peace Prize. Thus began a decade of unprecedented North-South cooperation, albeit patchy and one-sided. This ‘sunshine’ policy was ended by South Korea’s current president, Lee Myung-bak, who insists that the North must give up its nuclear weapons first if it wants better ties with the South. That sounds fine in theory, but few expect it will ever happen.

North Korea made much of the June 15 anniversary, even while excoriating the “traitor” Lee Myung-bak for trampling on it. Pyongyang warmly welcomed a South Korean radical priest, Han Song-ryeol, who made the trip illegally to mark the occasion. One hopes Seoul will not make a martyr of him when he returns home, as has happened to similar figures in the past.

South Korea by contrast played up the war anniversary more than the inter-Korean one. Lee Myung-bak used this occasion to once again call on the North to admit that it sank the ROK corvette Cheonan on March 26, and to apologise. This was the first time in many years for the President to take part in June 25 activities, which are normally left to the prime minister.

Will the Cheonan go unpunished?

While the Cheonan continues to weigh heavily on North Korea’s external relations, it looks increasingly as if Pyongyang has got away with it. June brought Lee Myung-bak little joy on the issue, at home or abroad. Local elections in South Korea on June 2 saw his ruling Grand National Party (GNP) rebuffed, contrary to opinion polls and despite expectations that, as oft times before, a “North wind” would scare electors into voting conservative. Not this time. In Seoul the ROK’s only female ex-premier, Han Myeong-sook, almost unseated a popular and dynamic GNP mayor, Oh Se-hoon, by campaigning as the “peace candidate.” While a mid-term rebuff for the incumbent is not unusual, it seems as if some voters saw Lee’s tough first reactions, which roiled global markets on May 24-25, as adding to rather than reducing risk. (That some South Koreans embrace conspiracy theories, such as ‘friendly fire’ by a US ship, testifies to a fetid and introverted blogosphere, if not a society sick and sour with suspicion.)

Abroad too Lee has met obstacles. Assured of firm US and other Western support – on June 17 the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning North Korea – he is struggling to convince Russia and China. That was predictable: for Beijing and Moscow,

unwillingness to paint Pyongyang into a corner was always going to trump the facts. A Russian naval team visited Seoul to inspect the Cheonan wreckage, including DPRK torpedo parts, but is not expected to report until July. In this light the ROK government will be relieved that the G-8 summit in Canada on June 25 issued a strong statement on the Cheonan – after energetic lobbying by Japan’s new prime minister Naoto Kan, which will get his relations with Lee Myung-bak off to a good start. Connoisseurs of diplomatic wordplay noted that while the G-8 condemned the attack, noted that an international team had blamed it on Pyongyang, and called on the DPRK to avoid any attacks against the ROK, it did not quite join up all those dots; doubtless at Moscow’s behest. Lee may lobby similarly when he arrives for the ensuing G-20 summit; although since South Korea chairs the group and will host its next jamboree in Seoul in November, it may look bad if he were perceived as acting in too particularist a way.

Earlier, on June 4 South Korea formally referred the Cheonan incident to the UN Security Council (UNSC). On June 14 both Korean states briefed the UNSC, with the North as ever denying all responsibility and urging the Council not to consider the matter. No official response is expected until July. With Russia and China likely to abstain at best, whatever the Security Council eventually comes up with looks set to be a damp squib. South Korea has already said it will not seek further sanctions, on top of those already in force under earlier UNSC resolutions from 2006 and 2009 after the North’s two nuclear tests. But it would like a clear, resounding condemnation, preferably in the form of a resolution. It may not get one.

Looking ahead, it is not too soon to wonder how the two Koreas will get past the Cheonan, as they must and will. Record numbers of DPRK workers at the Kaesong Industrial Zone (KIZ) – 44,000 as of June, according to the ROK unification ministry (MOU) – are seen in Seoul as a sign that at some level Pyongyang remains committed to this joint venture at least.

On June 16 Lee Myung-bak’s aides reported that the ROK president had got up in the small hours to watch the DPRK play Brazil in the soccer World Cup finals in South Africa (more on that below). His spokesman said Lee “wholeheartedly supported the North Korean team and wished them good luck ... Inter-Korean relations have been worsening since the sinking of the warship Cheonan, but it is politics. As a compatriot, he really wanted them to win.” That sounds like an olive branch – or perhaps a tacit admission that Lee has no idea how to handle the North, as has been all too apparent ever since he was elected 30 months ago.

Reshuffles promote familiar old faces

Meanwhile North Korea looks more preoccupied – as well it might be – with the succession issue right now than in reaching out to South Korea or anywhere else for the time being. Not a lot happens in Pyongyang politics as a rule, but June brought two important developments.

On June 7 the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA), North Korea’s rubber-stamp parliament, held a rare second session – less than two months after its regular meeting on April 9, which approved the budget. Kim Jong-il attended the June meeting; he had not bothered in April.

The sole business of this new session was to announce major cabinet and personnel changes. In principle this could have been done in April. That it was not suggests that matters may be fluid at the top in Pyongyang, with the mask of monolithism barely hiding power struggles.

Three ministers were sacked: those for food and light industry – suggesting all is not well in these most basic of fields – and sport, though the DPRK’s footballers had yet to crash out of the World Cup. Three vice-premiers were dismissed too, while four more were appointed – including the incumbent ministers for the electronics and machine-

building industries.

New blood does not mean fresh faces: the new vice-premiers are aged 82, 80, 77 and 72. The same pattern of entrenching mostly elderly loyalists was seen in the two key changes. The DPRK now has a new premier, replacing the confusingly named Kim Jong-il. Rather than some young dynamic reformer, they drafted in Choe Yong-rim, an old party hack aged 79.

The other big change is promotion for Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law Jang Song-taek to vice-chairman of the National Defence Commission, just a year after he first joined the DPRK's highest executive body (outranking the cabinet) as a rare civilian member. Kim Jong-il, who chairs the NDC, proposed him. Contrary to some reports, this does not make Jang formally the number two man in Pyongyang, though in practice that is the case. What is overlooked is that the NDC, like other DPRK bodies (the foreign ministry, for one) also has a post of first vice-chairman. So far as is known that position is still held by Jo Myong-rok: the now ailing vice-marshal who in 2000 took tea with Bill Clinton at the White House in full KPA regalia.

A car crash, or so they say

Not all personnel changes in Pyongyang proceed via due process. Ri Je-gang, another senior figure (aged 80) seen as a key backer of Kim Jong-il's third son and putative heir Kim Jong-eun, on June 1 as often had enjoyed a jolly night out with the boss. KCNA reported him as among the dear leader's party at a performance given by KPA art squad Unit 963. This is worth quoting in full, for those unfamiliar with the entertainment scene in North Korea:

The squad put on the stage such colorful numbers of diverse genres as female quintet "We Serve the General", male solo and mixed octet "We Will Remain True to the Leadership of the Party", dialogic poem "Gigantic Footprints for Devoted Service", Oungum* and female sextet "Bright Moon over Our Country", agitation through reminiscences "Comrades! Take This Revolver, Please!", serial of wartime songs "My Song in the Trench", "To a Decisive Battle" and "For My Only Motherland" and chorus "The Road of Victory"... They also fully demonstrated the might of the soldier-artistes creditably performing their sacred mission as buglers in the Songun era. (* The oungeum is a stringed instrument invented in the 1960s, allegedly by Kim Jong-il; it features much tremolo and vibrato.)

One hopes Ri had fun, for this was his last night on earth. KCNA's next report on him was of Kim Jong-il sending a wreath to his bier; he died in a car accident at 1245 am that night. (Sometimes DPRK media are far more informative than one might expect.) This could be true. Pyongyang has famously little traffic; but it is ill lit, and people drive fast – and drunk.

But if as rumoured Ri was a rival of Jang Song-taek, his demise was convenient. Michael Madden, whose newish blog NKLeadershipWatch has swiftly become indispensable, notes that in recent months eleven senior DPRK figures have died or been sacked or changed jobs. Some of this may be natural; in a gerontocracy, people die off. But other instances look odd.

Thus on May 13 the NDC said it had relieved vice defence minister Kim Il-chol of all posts, citing "his advanced age of 80." That strains credulity. Not only are many top positions held by octogenarians, but Kim looked well enough at recent outings – including the funerals of other elite figures. An admiral whose rise began with the 1968

seizure of the USS Pueblo, he was defence minister from 1998 till 2009 when he was demoted to vice-minister: a rare step. His sudden departure might reflect dissent at this demotion. Or given his naval background, the speculation in Seoul is that this is linked in some obscure way to the Cheonan affair.

A big event in September

All that is quite enough excitement by North Korean standards, but there was more to come. On June 26 KCNA reported that “the Political Bureau of the WPK [Workers’ Party of Korea] Central Committee decides to convene early in September ... a conference of the WPK for electing its highest leading body reflecting the new requirements of the WPK.”

This is intriguing on several fronts. Though it is nominally North Korea’s ruling communist party, and still an important tool of control at lower echelons, the WPK has seen its topmost organs atrophy under Kim Jong-il. Neither the rarely mentioned Politburo – most of whose members have died off – nor even the Central Committee (CC) is known to have met at all in the 16 years since Kim Il-sung died in 1994. His son Kim Jong-il has favoured the army, ruling through the NDC and informally via a kitchen cabinet of trusted cronies. The dear leader is also of course secretary-general of the WPK, but he acquired that post irregularly: by acclamation at a series of local Party meetings, rather than being duly elected by the CC.

Hence while the precise nature of September’s meeting remains vague, like its exact date, it looks like a long overdue effort to restore a measure of due process to the Party. If this is in fact a full formal WPK congress, it would be the first since the Sixth Congress thirty years ago in October 1980. It was then that Kim Jong-il, hitherto veiled behind coded references to a mysterious “Party Centre”, was finally revealed in the flesh. The speculation is that this new meeting similarly will finally give the world a glimpse of the enigmatic Kim Jong-eun.

While all rumours emanating from Seoul should be treated carefully – the more so now that the ROK’s riposte to the Cheonan includes a declared resumption of psychological warfare – it is hard not to link this news with reports that Kim Jong-il’s health is worsening. There are claims that on some of his reportedly numerous guidance visits, aides including his son are duping him with Potemkin factories to hide from him how dire the economy really is. Yet Kim is no fool – unless perhaps, as other reports suggest, he is developing Alzheimer’s. In that case an already tardy succession can clearly brook no further delay, or else regime stability and continuity may be gravely imperilled.

Hence, perhaps, September’s meeting.

The economy shrank again last year

If Kim Jong-il wants or is compos mentis enough to know how his economy is really doing, he could look at the latest estimates from the enemy. Each year the (southern) Bank of Korea (BOK) endeavours to compute North Korean national income. Quite how they go about this in the absence of any official data is obscure, and some scholars are sceptical. But at least a time series using consistent methodology may pick up changes, which is better than nothing.

BOK published its latest estimates, covering 2009, on June 24: just in time for Seoul to crow about them as it marked the Korean War anniversary. By its reckoning North Korea’s real annual gross domestic product (GDP) shrank by 0.9% last year. Unlike most other countries – including South Korea, which just scraped positive growth of 0.2% – this had little to do with the global financial crisis. Rather it reflected local conditions, natural and man-made: “....decreased agricultural production due to damage from particularly severe cold weather and sluggish manufacturing production owing to a lack of raw materials and electricity.”

According to BOK, North Korea has posted negative growth in three of the past four

years. Taking the longer view, the DPRK economy has yet to recover from the catastrophe of the 1990s, when GDP plunged by half after the abrupt ending of aid from Moscow and famine took perhaps a million lives in 1995-98. GDP today is probably still lower than in 1989.

As usual, BOK's North-South comparisons make painful reading. It was not always thus. In a new book the US scholar Nicholas Eberstadt deploys a wealth of statistics to conclude that North Korea – the site of most of the peninsula's heavy industry during the Japanese colonial era – out-performed the South economically for a quarter of a century after partition in 1945, and perhaps even into the 1970s. That half-time lead, so to speak, has now been definitively reversed as the Northern economy collapsed while the South continues to forge ahead.

The gaps just get wider

The result is a huge and ever widening gap. Structurally, agriculture still contributes a fifth of Northern GDP as against just 2.6% in the South. Services make up 61% of Southern GDP but only 32% in the North. In overall size – and using a slightly different measure, nominal gross national income (GNI) – North Korea's national income in 2009 was a mere 2.7% of the South's. BOK gives the numbers in ROK won. Converting them to US dollars at the rate BOK cites (US\$1=KRW1,276.4), Northern GNI in 2009 was US\$22.4 billion, compared to US\$837 billion for the South. True, the South has over twice as many people: 48.7 as against 23.3 million. But this hardly helps: average North Korean per capita income too is a minute fraction of the South's, with the ROK topping US\$17,000 while the DPRK's is a paltry US\$960. (Some experts, including a former unification minister, think even this is too high and posit a figure nearer US\$300, putting North Korea among the poorest nations on earth.)

With trade figures we are on surer ground – and the gap is even wider. According to BOK, North Korea's merchandise goods trade in 2009 totalled US\$3.41 billion: a mere 0.5% or one two-hundredth of South Korea's US\$686 billion. That is untrue. Annoyingly, BOK like other ROK government sources persists in excluding inter-Korean trade, on the specious ground that this is not foreign. (One might expect Lee Myung-bak of all people to have got rid of this nonsense; just as one hopes that one of these years BOK will convert its figures to the normal global units of thousand, million and billion, rather than presenting them in the Korean man-ok system which uses 10,000 and 100 million to confuse the unwary foreigner.)

This year inter-Korean trade will fall, since Seoul has banned most of it (except the Kaesong zone, which accounts for over half) as punishment for the Cheonan. Peanuts to the South, this has been crucial for the North: South Korea is its largest market, taking almost half of its meagre total exports. Last year inter-Korean trade like DPRK trade overall fell slightly, from US\$1.82 to US\$1.68 billion. Yet Northern exports crept up, from US\$932 to 934 million.

Reassembling what BOK perversely separates, in 2009 North Korea's real trade totals were just under US\$2 billion in exports and US\$3.1 billion in imports. They are still dwarfed by South Korea's respective figures of US\$364 and US\$324 billion – and this in a bad year for the South, due to the downturn; Seoul's 2008 figures had been US\$422 and \$435 billion.)

One could go on, and BOK does. Sector by sector, it is a similar story. Only in mining (coal, iron ore) is the North ahead, and then only because most of the peninsula's minerals lie north of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). The Chinese are busy buying them, the more so now that Seoul has withdrawn from the fray; but that is another story. Otherwise the multiples pile up. In 2009 South Korea produced five times more fertiliser, eight times more cement, 18 times more electricity, and 39 times more steel than the North. It even grew 2.6 times as much rice, and imported 219 times as much crude oil.

And so on, and so on. Every year the gap widens further, yet still Kim Jong-il refuses economic reform. It is hard to fathom a mind-set which can inflict such disaster and tragedy on a once proud land and people – and whose idea of a way out of its self-dug hole is to fire a sneaky torpedo.

Good losers

In a busy month all round, it was left to North Korea's footballers to remind the world that their country does not lack for talent and virtue. For the first time ever, both Koreas made it to the finals of the soccer World Cup, held in South Africa. Luck of the draw put the DPRK in a formidable group. They began quite creditably, going down 2:1 to Brazil on June 15 in a game far more evenly matched than most had expected, including a brilliant late goal from Ji Yun-nam. That was the high point. There followed a 7:0 trouncing by Portugal – who had also knocked their famous predecessors out of the 1966 competition, held in England – and a 3:0 defeat by Ivory Coast. (South Korea fared better in an easier group; they reached the last 16, only to be knocked out on June 26 by Uruguay – population 3.5 million.)

As one would expect, North Korea were a disciplined team: a refreshing change from the petulant prima donnas who rule the modern game. Yet as in 1966 this was not at the price of flair, at least on the field. Off-pitch was another story: the team kept to itself and avoided the press – with one striking exception. Jong Tae-se, known as the Asian Wayne Rooney, is not your average North Korean. Born in Japan to a South Korean father and a pro-North Korean mother, having attended schools run by Chongryun – the organisation of pro-North Koreans in Japan – he elected to play for the DPRK; although he still holds ROK nationality, lives in Japan and plays in the J-League for Kawasaki Frontale.

A young man whose talk is as uninhibited as his style of play and who wears his heart on his sleeve, Jong cried when the DPRK anthem was played before the Brazil match. Yet his love for his adopted homeland is not uncritical. "Everybody thinks about our country as being closed and mysterious, so we have to change that," he told AFP. "We can change for the better if we are more open with the way we talk to people and it would make a better team."

It would make a better country too. If North Korea's fate must rest in the hands of an untried youth, better it were the warm-hearted and wised-up Jong Tae-se than Kim Jong-eun.

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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