

Policy Forum 06-45A: North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing?

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Essay by Alexander V. Vorontsov

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I. Introduction

Alexander V. Vorontsov, *Visiting Fellow* at the Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies at the

Brooking Institution, writes, " *Songun* should not be automatically dismissed as an ideological dead-end. As the experience of South Korea under Park Chung-hee demonstrates, military rule can have positive effects on society under certain conditions."

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II. Essay by Alexander V. Vorontsov

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by Alexander V. Vorontsov

The "Songun Chongch'i" or military-first politics mantra adopted by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il as a guideline for domestic governance and foreign policy has elicited mostly negative responses from Korea-watchers. Many view *songun* as the final phase in the deterioration of North Korea and a serious threat to neighboring states saying that an impoverished country of 24 million inhabitants supporting a military of more than 1 million soldiers is incapable of modernization and economic reform. They argue that greater military participation in politics creates a dual-pronged threat: the army may appropriate a greater share of already-dwindling state funds to increase its readiness and effectiveness; and the generals, supposedly the most militant sector of the policy-making structure, will have a louder voice in foreign policy formulation, which could lead to hostile rhetoric towards South Korea.

A less alarmist interpretation of military-first politics is that Kim Jong-il is trying to maintain the existing order, to strengthen his regime based on personal authority, and consolidate control of military forces with the goal of preventing an overthrow of the state.

So, is military authority a curse or a blessing? The lessons from history are ambiguous, as states ruled by the military have experienced both prosperity and hardship. But some argue that South Korea represents a relatively positive example in which it has experienced a national revival because of a period of military rule.

In 1961, Park Chung-hee, a colonel in the ROK army, seized authority South Korea in a bloodless coup and established a rigid dictatorship with his military comrades. Though politics became more repressive, the national economy grew exponentially and General Park is remembered by many as the "father of the South Korean economic miracle." Few dispute that this economic growth planted the seeds for the ensuing process of democratization. So it is hardly accidental that, in recent years, Kim Jong-il has started to speak favorably of General Park and his role in the modernization of the Republic of Korea.

The implementation of *songun* in the mid-1990s increased the role of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in daily life. The army began to participate even more in social and economic decision-making, from large-scale infrastructure development to providing its own food. While military personnel are required to serve for ten years, they spend most of their service participating in different areas of the country's socio-economic life. Thus, the army is now not as heavy economic burden, and is serves as an important resource and catalyst for developing the national economy.

The movement to the military-first policy has accompanied a gradual transformation of North Korea's planned economy to the direction of a mixed economy. The result may eventually be a network of large, less state-controlled corporations that share close ties with government agencies, similar to the "chaebol" that Park Chung-hee created in South Korea. Because of this, the North

Korean military is now involved in different spheres of economic activity, including foreign economic ties and trade operations, and will likely play a key role in this ongoing process of privatization.

With *songun* also come changes in ideology. This change and its underlying goal of building a powerful and prosperous state - "kangsong taeguk," are justified by flexible and creative interpretations of the bedrock ideal of self-reliance - "juche," a nationalist ideology developed by revolutionary leader Kim Il-sung. The *songun* concept replaces the proletariat and the vanguard Communist Party with the army as the driving force in society. This innovation is significant because the army is typically a less ideological and more pragmatic institution than the Party.

The army's role in society is not the only example of Kim Jong-il's liberation from orthodox ideologies. Since the early 1990s, North Korea has shifted its emphasis from socialist ideals to historical and spiritual values. This is reflected in the use of Confucian norms in public policy and everyday life, and legitimizing the state through reference ancient Korean kingdoms. Again, the parallels with Park Chung-hee are very strong. Kim Jong-il has also sought to reduce the prevalence of the personality cult. From early 2004, for example, there could be only one portrait of Kim Il-sung in public places. Similarly, Kim Jong-il is to be described only by his official positions, rather than the use of laudatory epithets such as "Dear Leader."

songun should not be automatically dismissed as an ideological dead-end. As the experience of South Korea under Park Chung-hee demonstrates, military rule can have positive effects on society under certain conditions.

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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