

Policy Forum 07-004: Paek the Opaque: Another Old North Korean Bites the Dust



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Article by Aidan Foster-Carter

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I. Introduction

Aidan Foster-Carter, is honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University in the UK, writes, "A nuclear North Korea is indeed a worry, but it is not the only one. The

world, and even Pyongyang, will take the death of Paek Nam Sun (who?) in its stride. But Kim Jong Il could go just as suddenly. In that case all bets for North Korea would be off."

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II. Article by Aidan Foster-Carter

- Paek the Opaque: Another Old North Korean Bites the Dust
by Aidan Foster-Carter

Everyone is famous for 15 minutes, at least according to the late American pop artist and cultural icon Andy Warhol.

For Paek Nam Sun, that was literally true. North Korea's foreign minister since 1998, who has just died, hit the headlines just once in all his 77 years - and then only on the inside pages, mainly of the regional press in Asia.

Coffee with evil in Brunei

That was in August 2002, when for a quarter of an hour Paek sipped coffee with his rather better known US opposite number at the time, Colin Powell. The place was Brunei; the occasion, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

Senior American and North Korean leaders rarely meet at the best of times, which this was not. Earlier that year, President George W Bush had famously labeled Kim Jong Il's regime, along with Iran and Iraq, as part of an "axis of evil". So for his Secretary of State to dally thus with the enemy, even briefly, raised eyebrows in some quarters.

We know now, as suspected at the time, that Powell was keen to engage North Korea. But vice-president Dick Cheney was dead against, and Cheney had Bush's ear.

Any hopes of renewed dialogue were dashed later in 2002. Accused by Washington of a second, covert nuclear programme, North Korea restarted its first one precipitating a crisis that continues, climaxing (so far) in its testing a nuclear device on October 9.

Paek low in the pecking order

With the nuclear crisis ongoing, we might have expected to see more of Paek Nam Sun. But they do things differently in North Korea.

A senior diplomat (and sometime ambassador to Poland) who had also been active in early contacts with South Korea since the 1970s, as foreign minister the genial Paek was a largely ceremonial figure: trundled out for occasions like the ARF. As such he was in Kuala Lumpur last July, where he reportedly also had medical treatment.

Serious negotiations, on the other hand, were and are the province of Paek's nominal deputies: two above all. The better known is deputy foreign minister Kim Kye Gwan, who heads Pyongyang's delegation to the on-off six party nuclear talks. A skilled and confident negotiator, Kim even gave an unscripted if brief press conference after the latest round of talks, held in Beijing last month, ended inconclusively.

But the real heavy hitter is first vice foreign minister Kang Sok Ju. He it was who negotiated the October 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework (AF); defusing an earlier North Korean nuclear crisis (*plus ca change*), back in the Bill Clinton era, which in mid-1994 had come perilously close to unleashing a second Korean War. If the six-party process ever gets anywhere, which is doubtful, Kang will be wheeled on again. For now, the more junior Kim Kye Gwan does the honours.

Puzzling pseudonymy

So Paek Nam Sun's passing will hardly send a tremor through North Korea's foreign policy. But it does shed light on the curious way they order matters in Pyongyang.

For one thing, what was his real name? The man who first showed up in the 1970s for Red Cross talks with South Korea was known as Paek Nam Jun. But after he became foreign minister, the J mysteriously morphed into an S.

Peculiar, but not unique. Ri Jong Hyok, Pyongyang's current point man for ties with Seoul, was Ri Dong Hyok in the 1980s when he headed North Korea's quasi-embassy in Paris. There are several other such cases. It's hardly a disguise, so what gives?

(*En passant* , the French connection is intriguing. Nominally the last EU state to resist full recognition of the DPRK, in practice France has hosted a North Korean legation since the 1970s. And both Kang Sok Ju and Kim Kye Gwan majored in French: the traditional language of international diplomacy.)

Dying off

Another oddity: North Korean elites hardly ever retire. Like Paek, they mostly die in post, often at an advanced age. Communist regimes tend to gerontocracy: think China, at least until recently. But North Korea has taken this, like most things, to extremes.

Since Kim Jong Il succeeded his father Kim Il Sung as leader in 1994, the nominally ruling communist party, the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), seems to be frozen - at least at the top. No new appointments to the Politburo have been announced in over a decade. Instead its ranks have been thinned by the remorseless march of mortality.

Latest to go was Kye Ung Tae, who as KWP secretary for national security wielded far more power than Paek Nam Sun. Kye died of lung cancer on November 23, aged 81. That leaves just six full Politburo members. One anti-Japanese guerilla veteran and honorary vice president Pak Song Chol passed 93 last September. Three others are over 80. Titular head of state Kim Yong Nam turns 79 on February 4, just before the "dear leader" Kim Jong Il a mere lad by comparison reaches his 65th birthday.

That would be retiring age in most normal countries. But Kim Jong Il has yet to name a successor, among several competing sons and other contenders. His health is said to be not of the best although such rumors have proved premature in the past.

A nuclear North Korea is indeed a worry, but it is not the only one. The world, and even Pyongyang, will take the death of Paek Nam Sun (who?) in its stride. But Kim Jong Il could go just as suddenly. In that case all bets for North Korea would be off.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send

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