

Policy Forum 05-18A: Reading North Korean Ruins



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Soyoung Kwon and Glyn Ford (MEP)

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I. Introduction

Dr. Soyoung Kwon a post-doctorate fellow at the Asia-Pacific Research Centre of Stanford University, and Glyn Ford, a member of the Korean Peninsula Delegation in the European Parliament, write: "security and the economy are North Korea's two top priorities. All of which seems to indicate that Kim Jong Il is firmly behind and committed to the economic reform process. For

those who favor a changing regime rather than regime change the message is clear. Now is the time to engage."

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. Essay by Soyoung Kwon and Glyn Ford (MEP)

-"Reading North Korean Ruins"

by Soyoung Kwon and Glyn Ford (MEP)

Recent events in North Korea have been read in a number of ways where generally the wish has been father to the thought. The truth is difficult to discern but the indications are that North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Il, has placed himself firmly behind the reform program that may bring North Korea finally in from the cold. The fact that Pyongyang is considering applying for observer status at the WTO supports this contention. Any view of North Korea is through a glass darkly. It is one of the world's least transparent regimes with no open political process that allows elite change to be monitored. For example, there has not been a Party Congress convened since 1980. No official plenary meetings of the Central Committee have taken place since the 21st plenary session of the sixth congress of the Korean Worker's Party in 1993; there has not been a single new member co-opted onto the Central Committee since then. Thus, to understand what is happening it is necessary to rely on rumors in the international media based on unnamed sources and speculation, this with the explosive additive of preconceived political agendas and wishful and wistful thinking. Yet such information normally has a kernel of truth, which can be extracted by a discreet filtering and screening process. Pieces of the jigsaw can be assembled to give at least a partial picture of events.

In 2004 there was speculation about the stability of the North Korean leadership, with suggestions that Kim Jong Il's power was being challenged. In April, Jang Song Thaek, Kim's brother-in-law and the second highest official in the North Korean power hierarchy, was reported to have been removed from his post. In May, there were reports in South Korea that the chemical signature of the Ryong Chon explosion failed to support the North Koreans claims that it was merely an unfortunate railway accident when a train loaded with chemicals hit a power line, but rather an assassination attempt on the life of Kim Jong Il, who returned from a trip to China along the same line eight hours earlier than expected. Accompanying this account was the rumored arrest of a group of ten young North Korean pro-Chinese technocrats.

Further rumors leading to a fanciful and far-fetched cocktail of hopeful predictions about a power struggle around the succession to Kim Jong Il following the death of Ko Young-Hee, Kim Jong Il's wife, surfaced in September. Speculation on fractures within the North Korean Regime (*New York Times* - Nov 22, 2004) was heightened in the recent months when Kim Jong Il disappeared from view. Rumors followed of Kim Jong Il's deteriorating health and the spread of anti-Kim Jong Il protest posters plus the removal of Kim Jong Il's portrait from some public places. These reports were linked to North Korea's postponement of the Six Party Talks in September that were trying to resolve the ongoing nuclear crisis although the proximity of the US Presidential Elections clearly played a role. All of which fed a frenzy of media speculation that parleyed into North Korea being in danger of imminent collapse.

An article in the Joongang daily newspaper (a RoK source - www.joins.com) on 8th December 2004 entitled 'North's political base gets a makeover' reported a major restructuring and reshuffling of the Korean Workers Party for the first time since 1994. The shake-up was triggered by the purge mentioned above of the party's first deputy director, Jan Song Thaek, and his close associates earlier

in the year. The article claimed that Kim had eliminated three out of twenty-two Bureaus of the secretariat of the Party's Central Control Committee with an accompanying reassignment of 40 percent of the secretariat. The Bureaus abolished were military affairs, economic policy and agricultural affairs, the purpose being to stop the Party meddling in military policy and to free the cabinet to handle economic and agricultural policies without interference to enable the economic reforms that began in July 2002 to be pushed ahead.

The restructuring of the Party, although officially denied, followed by the removal of Jang and his associates clearly signifies the emergence for the first time in decades of division and dissension within the leadership. But it is hardly surprising with the radical reforms currently being carried out in the industry and agricultural sectors alongside the marketisation of the economy. This suspicion is backed by a report of North Korea's Central Broadcast Agency on 23 September 2004, which came out in support for the 'Party's monolithic leadership system,' contending "the Party cannot maintain its existence with severe fragmentation by permitting factions." This suggests the emergence, despite US claims to the contrary, of factions within the Party. This was almost certainly Jang and his followers trying to use the Party as a vehicle to halt the reform process. After all, Jang was the second most powerful man in the Party after Kim Jong Il and has two brothers who are prominent figures in the military. Clearly differences of opinion exist within the leadership - hard vs. soft; military vs. party; technocrats vs. ideologues, etc... Different groups have contended for influence in the policy-making process. No group in the present leadership was identified to have resources and potential for a direct challenge on Kim Jong Il but Jang's group. Jang as a Party man was unenthusiastic about the reform process. He had clashed with Pak Pong-Ju, prime minister and the head of the North Korean cabinet in charge of economic reform measures. It was then that Jang was purged and the Party disciplined and restructured.

The Party makeover and the dismissal of Jang are linked to the leadership succession issue. It has parallels to events in the late 1970s when Kim Il Sung was leader. Kim carried out a major reshuffling in the leadership when he was secretly preparing his son, Kim Jong Il, as his successor. This included the removal of Kim Young Ju, Kim's brother and the number two at the time. Kim Young-Ju was initially thought to be Kim Il Sung's favored candidate for succession and had built up a following on that basis. In 1976, Kim Young Ju suddenly disappeared from the political scene, and did not really re-appear until 1993 when he returned to the Party Central Committee. Now that Kim Jong Il is turning 63, the succession is again becoming an issue. Kim Jong Il has not officially designated a successor. However, events suggest the removal of those who might oppose Kim Jong Il's eventual choice. A high-level defector, Hwang Jang-Yup, claimed two years ago that Jang as number two was likely to be named as Kim Jong Il's successor (Hwang Jang Yup's interview, *Joongang Daily News*, July 2, 2002). Jang's clear attempt to build his own autonomous group in the military and the Party using his power and connections suggests his and his followers' current demotion may signal that Kim Jong Il has made a different choice, driven partly by Kim Jong Il's commitment to the reform agenda. Removal of potential rivals and opponents is the start of the succession process. In such a context, the removal of Kim Jong Il's portrait may signal the regime's early moves to engineer a gradual leadership transition blessed by posthumous support from Kim Il Sung.

The elimination of the military bureau and economic policy bureaus of the Korean Workers Party is equally to free military and economic matters from Party's ideological straight jacket. One of the dilemmas the North Korean regime is facing is how to square economic changes and the 'military-first: Songun' politics with the unbending ideological convictions of the Party. The changes now mean that matters will be dealt with by the National Defense Committee claimed by Kim Jong Il himself while economic and agricultural matters will be handled by the Cabinet without Party interference and obstruction. If it works it will maintain Kim Jong Il's firm grip and give more

freedom for reform to the cabinet, sidelining the Party and enabling the technocrats their lead in trying to manage the economy back from the brink. This view is reinforced by the new year's joint editorial (*Rodong Sinmun* Jan 1, 2005 and KCNA, Jan 2, 2005 - daily newspaper of the Central Committee), in which Kim Jong Il emphasized improvement in the agricultural and economic sectors through "enhancing the function and role of the Cabinet as an organizer and performer of the economic work". South Korean experts take a similar view, seeing the reshuffle as a means to consolidating economic management under the Premier Park, who is a champion of economic reform. "[Kim Jong Il] wants to give Jang and other people in the Party a warning signal not to interfere in the economic matters of the cabinet and strengthen reform," one expert said.

Security and the economy are North Korea's two top priorities. North Korea knows that the two are closely intertwined and that economic reforms cannot be pushed forward unless security issues are resolved. On 10 February, the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially admitted its possession of nuclear weapons, and released a statement on suspending its participation in six-party talks for indefinite period unless the US changes its hostile policy. If one regards it as a typical North Korea's strategy of brinkmanship, it can be interpreted as a provocative action against the U.S. which may pose further challenges to resolving the nuclear issue. In connection to the structural readjustment and policy goal orientation mentioned above, however, North Korea's action can be equally viewed as a desperate measure to solve the long-delayed security issue and to create a favorable environment for further economic change. Assessing that the six-party talks would not quickly deliver what North Korea needs or alter the Bush administration's approach, the DPRK is now putting bargaining chips on the table, hoping for the U.S. to respond. The recent tactical change of the DPRK may thus be understood in line with change of domestic policy goals and its pending needs for national security conducive to efficient economic development.

For those who favour a changing regime rather than regime change the message is clear. Now is the time to engage. The EU will be rethinking its engagement policy with the DPRK over the next few months. The EU can take a lead here in helping to manage North Korea into the international community, rather than drive it into a corner.

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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