

Reformer Flame: Neutralized Moth. Why did Kim Han-sol do a TV interview?

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While Kim Han-sol's recent video created a splash, his comments do not alter North Korea's trajectory in any meaningful way UNLESS his comments were explicitly directed from a capital city. We will almost certainly not know and therefore cannot discount the possibility that one or more capitals are reaching out via this young man in a strategic communication - although he is presently not connected enough to effect any changes.

Visitors to Pyongyang who talked with the regime princes in the early 90s report similar views, but those views were only expressed privately. Thus the key question is why Han-sol is talking publicly, now, and outside of the DPRK, rather than the views themselves being new.

What might motivate some capital to reach out via Kim Han-sol? There are four broad possibilities: 1) open a new channel; 2) light a flame to which the reform moths will be drawn, self-identified and easier to neutralize; 3) groom a compromise candidate the Six Parties can agree to at some future date; 4) create fissures in North Korea via a "borrowed sword".

New Channel: Old Game

Kim Han-sol, in near native-fluent and American-accented English, says he maintains ties to North Korea. Although, he stipulates that he does not have ties to Kim Jong-Un, Han-sol did not reject meeting Jong-un. Bespoke earrings emphasize Han-sol also listens. Even though he has travelled freely in the past, there is no guarantee he can do so in the future. Even a new channel to send the same old messages back and forth, offers hope this time it is different.

Reformer Flame: Neutralized Moth

Pyongyang has interest in identifying the reformers and stopping, neutralizing or even re-directing them. Knowing who the reformers are and their plans is critical. Han-sol becomes a very bright flame attracting reformist moths from outside and inside the regime. As the reformers self-identify, Pyongyang learns the breadth and interconnections of the reform movement as well as their plans. If North Korea does have any plans to reform, ensuring everyone adheres to the reform plan outlined by Pyongyang makes a very difficult task a little easier.

The Chinese would like to see DPRK economic reform along the lines of China's very successful model. However, a "chaebol-like" economic reform model is likely more culturally acceptable to North Korea and certainly to South Korea while the other parties can tolerate it. Any reform would likely improve the plight of the average North Korean and provide governmental, economic and regulatory mechanisms which can be used for more substantive engagement if the political will exists.

Manchurian Candidate

Kim Han-sol is remarkably confident, articulate and possesses great presence for a 19 year old - a decade younger than Kim Jong-un who must now look up and down at potential threats. Han-sol's comments were critical of all countries, but not too critical. All Six Parties find things they like and dislike, thus casting him as a very good compromise candidate, especially if he ensures spending time learning from all Six Parties. Moreover, Han-sol at least twice points of emphasizing he comes from both the elite class of Pyongyang as well as the regular people of the provinces. He can claim to represent the interests of the entire North Korean people; super-elites, elites and commoners.

Kim says the right words about listening to various views and then making up his own mind. Again, saying this is not new - saying it publically and living - is new. If he's perceived as being relatively independent, legitimate and trusted to act in a mostly rational method, the other five parties will quickly find common ground to support him.

However, he will almost certainly be rejected by North Korea's military. There were no sops to "Military First" constituency in the video.

Borrowed Sword: Revolutionary Martyr

Why would Kim Han-sol draw so much attention to himself so early in life? The Libya revolution impressed him. He may have visions of starting or joining a Korean revolution. Those visions may have been instilled by any number of third parties. If this is the case, he may find revolutionary fame as a martyr since he's a direct threat to many in North Korea.

Conclusion: Excuse to talk

Back to the central question, why the video now? We don't know. But we can treat it as a North Korean outreach and start engaging North Korea anyway. North Korea will likely make their views known pretty quickly. Kim Han-sol's video and messages provide a thinly veiled means for the Six Parties and various combinations of them to discuss this video and get back into the habit of regular discussions. In the end, the video may have the important, yet unintended, consequence of re-opening channels that have been dormant too long.

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