

Response to “North Korea’s Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing”

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by Aidan Foster-Carter and Eric J. Ballbach

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the editorial "North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing" by Alexander V. Vorontsov. Aidan Foster-Carter is an honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University in Britain. He has been following North Korean affairs for more than 35 years. Eric J. Ballbach, M.A. is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Trier, Germany.

II. Comments by Aidan Foster-Carter on "North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing"

North Korea's Songun Policy: A Curse, No Question!

Contrarianism is useful, lest we get stuck in a mental rut. Alexander Vorontsov correctly reminds us that "military rule can have positive effects on society under certain conditions".

His instancing Park Chung-hee will upset some in Seoul, but the case can be made. One may also cite Ataturk, Nasser and a range of others across the globe during the past century.

But Kim Jong-il, and North Korea's songun (military-first) policy? That would need to be argued in more than 743 words. With similar brevity, let me put some counter-arguments.

The word songun may be new; the policy is not. North Korea long ago chose to be Sparta; Kim Il-sung, an ex-guerilla and no intellectual, praised Koguryo's military virtues. This fateful choice has inflicted huge suffering on the peninsula, and menace beyond to this day; starting with the cataclysm of the Korean War. Four million died; the border hardly moved.

Sensible small states seek security either under the skirts of big powers - *sadae*, if you will - or banding together to promote international law. By contrast, the Great Leader armed to the teeth. Not only has the KPA long been the world's largest armed force relative to total population, but it bristles with everything noxious: nukes, CBW, missiles, you name it...

North Korea has paid a high price for this, in all senses. After 1970 economic growth rates slowed, stopped, and finally reversed. Failure to reform and the end of Soviet aid were also factors, but the sheer financial burden of putting the KPA first was and remains crippling - far outweighing any minor contribution soldiers make to the economy. (Even North Korea is not so crazy as to take a million young adults entirely out of production for years on end; but it wastes billions of person-hours on soldiering, propaganda, mass games, and the like.)

In this sense, the lesson of Park Chung-hee is the exact opposite. Like Deng Xiaoping, Park grasped the Marxist truth that Kim Il-sung and Mao scorned: The economy really is basic.

By going all-out for growth, Park and Deng put their states among today's global top 10 economies. Nor was security sacrificed, for this boosted their national power enormously.

South Korea's defence budget, though just 3% of its GNP, at over US\$20 billion is bigger than the entire DPRK economy. Just as the US won the Cold War by outspending a USSR which could not afford to keep up in the arms race, the ROK is on course to do the same.

Far from creating a kangsong taeguk (strong prosperous state), songun proved a great leap backward. Once an industrialising model for the Third World, the DPRK was plunged into a terrible famine. At least a million ordinary North Koreans were sacrificed for songun.

Economic catastrophe aside, ultra-militarism also exacts its political and ideological price. Under Kim Jong-il the military has become a third estate, outranking the Party and cabinet. Those bemedalled old generals have much to lose from any outbreak of peace. (The ROK's sunshine policy is cunning here. Breaching the DMZ to reach the Kaesong and Kungang zones forces the KPA front line to retreat; no wonder they recently vetoed test train runs.)

Ideologically, after 60 years bellicosity is hardwired into the DPRK system. From cradle to grave, North Koreans are taught to fight and told they are under attack. A loyal soldier is the height of virtue. Is this mentality compatible with being a profit-seeking entrepreneur?

Doesn't the DPRK face a hostile world? Yes, but one largely of its own making. Donald Rumsfeld's recent trip to Hanoi shows there is another way. Vietnam suffered just as much at US hands, but it made its peace with Washington (easier, perhaps, if you won your war).

No one forces Koreans to wallow in han. North Korea's belligerence is self-defeating. How can you open for investment, yet pursue nuclear defiance that scares foreign investors off?

Yes, in its own way North Korea is changing - at long last. We all hope for a soft landing, and wish more power to sensible technocrats like premier Pak Pong-ju. But Pak cannot square the circle. Even he has to pay lip-service to songun and declare what he must know to be false: that prioritizing armaments is key to modernizing industry. He and his cabinet have no say at all over the separate military economy, which grabs the lion's share.

Are KPA-linked or other emergent semi-private enterprises really incipient chaebol? Or are corruption and dodgy short-term deals - what exactly after all does the KPA have to sell to global markets? - the order of the day, rather than rational long-term capital accumulation?

In sum: Far from being any kind of blessing, songun is North Korea's original sin. Putting the military first has done, and continues to do, nothing but harm: economically, politically, ideologically, and in external relations. This approach never has, and never could, create a kangsong taeguk - especially in an age of globalization. On the contrary: it sabotaged the DPRK's earlier industrial strength, while impoverishing and killing millions of Koreans.

What North Korea needs above all is what South Korea has experienced: a thoroughgoing re-civilianization. For Kim Jong-il, the begetter of the songun doctrine, that is a tough call.

III. Comments by Eric J. Ballbach on "North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing"

"Military-First", in my point of view, can be seen as a crucial part of KIM Jong-ils new Overall-Strategy and it has direct but different implications on Economy and (Security-) Politics. In the economic sector, KIM Jong-il after taking power - was mainly confronted with an essential dilemma: the regime was aware of the fact that a re-development of the Economy - on one hand - hinges on foreign capital and the process of opening to the outside world. On the other hand, however, the risks and dangers for the stability of the regime had to be minimized. The DPRK decision-makers tried to solve this dilemma with two measures: Because of the need for political and ideological justification for changing the existing economic order, they had to create an ideological (and institutional) basis, which legitimated the following reform measures (for example the July 2002

Reforms).

The ruling ideological principle, which equally explains and supports North Korea's new Strategy, is the so-called "New Thinking" (Sae-roun kwan-jom), which called for scrapping outmoded habits and mentalities and putting all efforts into the technological reconstruction of North Korea (...). 1998 the "Arduous March" was brought to a symbolic end and it was replaced by the Vision of "Strong and Prosperous Nation" (kang-song tae-guk), which is now described as "the great plan for the 21st century. The slogan hints at the balance between the two elementary aspects of the DPRK's new strategy: military strength and economic development. In reality, however, the focal point is the Military. This is not least proved by the proclamation of "Son-gun chong-ch" and its meaning as North Korea's cornerstone for Security and the Economy. When we talk about the DPRK's Economy and Security, it is essential to keep in mind this new strategic meaning of the Military within these both sectors. "Military-First" then has two motives: Firstly, it serves the need for Security for the DPRK, which from its own point of view is highly threatened (For North Korea, sharp rhetoric and its own Nuclear Program, as well as a high degree of Militarization is seen as reinsurance against an external attack). But "Military-First" can also be understood as an internal stability-guarantee in times of domestic Insecurities due to the difficult economic situation. With respect to the economic development of the ROK under PARK, Chung-hee, there's also a chance for economic and political reforms coming from "Military-First". It is safe to assume that not only in the North Korean case - such crucial reforms can only be implemented, when both external and internal security risks are minimized.

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