

Policy Forum 08-032: Socialist Neo-Conservatism in North Korea? A Return to Old Principles in the 2008 New Year Joint Editorial



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By Rudiger Frank

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I. Introduction

Rudiger Frank, Professor of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, writes, "In comparison with the 2007 issue, the return to old postures (socialism, Party, domestic resources) is the most striking difference. IT, standing at the core of the 2007 editorial, has not been mentioned in 2008; neither has the status as a nuclear power. Improving the standard of living is again an issue, but its coverage was less intense in 2008."

This is an excerpt from the forthcoming chapter on domestic developments in North Korea, to be published in fall 2008 as part of Volume II of the yearbook "Korea: Politics, Economy, and Society", edited by Rudiger Frank, Patrick Koellner, Jim Hoare and Susan Pares (Brill). For more information, please visit <http://www.brill.nl/default.aspx?partid=18&pid=29313>

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II. Article by Rudiger Frank

- "Socialist Neo-Conservatism in North Korea? A Return to Old Principles in the 2008 New Year Joint Editorial"

By Rudiger Frank

The year 2008 started with the usual New Year Joint Editorial, published jointly by the country's major print media *Rodong Sinmun* (party), *Chosòn Inmingun* (military) and *Ch'òngnyòn Chònwi* (youth league) and titled "Glorify This Year of the 60th Anniversary of the Founding of the DPRK as a Year of Historical Turn Which Will Go Down in the History of the Country". These annual editorials have, despite their propagandistic tone, achieved the status of programmatic announcements in lieu of other means of learning about the North Korean government's strategic visions and are especially valuable if compared to former versions. They are directed at the domestic population, studied, discussed and memorized, and serve as a policy guidance throughout the year.

While in 2007, the nuclear test and its implications were at the center of the editorial, the 2008 issue was more or less equally oriented at economic construction, ideological struggle and the second inter-Korean summit of October 2007. The preparation for a mass campaign to mark the 100th birthday of Kim Il-sung in 2012 was kick started. Less intensely than before, but still very clearly, the unity of the Korean nation was stressed, combined with the demand that the fellow countrymen make proper economic contributions in the spirit of patriotism. Remarkably, the overall tone of the editorial, although still very militant, indicates a certain return to old principles that appeared to be shaken by the economic reforms since 2002 and their ideological backup. The reasons are unknown and leave room for speculation. This socialist neo-conservatism, if observed correctly, could have been prompted either by external developments such as the new government in South Korea and the mounting problems within the Six Party Talks, or by domestic developments such as the again worsening economic situation and internal discussions about the continuity of political leadership; the most likely explanation is a combination of all these factors.

Chuch'e and *sòn'gun* (Military First) are equaled and both connected to the name of Kim Il-sung. This is a certain deviation from the former practice of ascribing *sòn'gun* to Kim Jong-il and

presenting it as an update of *chuch'e* , although he is later in the text strongly praised as a great leader and tactician who perfectly continues the work of his father in the spirit of *sòn'gun* and who should be followed and protected.

Important to note is a return to old formulae, especially the emphasis on socialism. The latter had been pushed into the background in the past years while nationalism was more actively promoted. The development goal, dubbed *Kangsòng Taeguk* , has been supplemented by the term "socialist" and is now called *Sahoejuì Kangsòng Taeguk* (socialist prosperous and strong great country). The Party, a few years ago appearing to receive less attention due to the rising role of the military, is standing at the center again and resumes its leadership over the army. The editorial stresses the single-minded unity of soldiers and people "rallied as one around the Party".

Continuing along the above mentioned neo-conservative trend, the editorial demands to set up an independent production system (*charipchògin saengsanch'eje*) that relies on domestic sources and technologies. In culture and art, too, independence and domestic forms were praised. The active role of North Korea in promoting peace and security on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia are stressed, the latter being a reference to the Six Party Talks and the February 13th 2007 agreement with the United States. This also reflects the ambitions of North Korea to be a player in regional politics. The fact that a growing number of states established diplomatic relations with Pyongyang is interpreted as a success of the Military First Policy.

The most important non-regular commemorative event for 2008 is the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the DPRK in September 1948. The past decades are seen as a time of great change and development, although in a more retrospective way as this was meant in previous years. The "superiority and invincibility" of socialism "of our own style" are stressed, as well as "anti-imperialist struggle". Memories of the *Ch'òllima* -movement (the softened North Korean version of the Great Leap) are evoked, and again the leading role of the Party is emphasized.

In response to the deteriorating situation after years of destabilization, uncontrollable interaction with the Chinese, the subsequent spread of South Korean media products and the increasing number of foreign visitors and contacts, ideology is stressed as "the primary national strength" (*cheil kungnyòk*). The ideologically hardened mental power (*chòngsinryòk*) of soldiers and people is described as being even stronger than nuclear weapons (*haekmugipoda tò kanghan*). This is an interesting remark that could either be interpreted as simply trying to emphasize the importance of not losing ground on the ideological front, or as a cautious hint that concessions in the field of nuclear weapons are not too dramatic as long as ideology is safeguarded. This signal is yet too weak to be treated as an indicator of North Korea's willingness to meet Washington's demands on denuclearization but nevertheless deserves our attention. The mental power of the people is connected to the leader who has to be defended at the risk of the people's own life (*suryòng kyòlsa onggi*).

In accordance with the above remarks, Korean-style socialism is stressed as "the destiny and future" of the North Korean people. The editorial demands the renouncement of individualism and argues that "no life is more fulfilling than the one devoted to society, collective, country and people". The "enemy's reactionary ideological and cultural infiltration" (*sasangmunhwajòk ch'imt'u*) is addressed directly, described as psychological warfare that will not be tolerated. Socialist morality is to be upheld. These strong words can be interpreted as reflecting the difficulties of the state to keep full ideological control and show how successful outside efforts at increasing the North Korea population's awareness of the outside world have become in the recent years.

In the section on the military, the building of domestic capacities is again stressed, in particular in the defense industry. The country's economic development is closely connected to the issue of

defense. Modernization is the major theme, combined with the demand to preserve the specific features of North Korea's economic structure. The same is repeated for external economic relations. The solution for the energy shortage is to be found in the construction of hydroelectric power plants. Mining is mentioned quite often at various occasions, indicating the renewed efforts at utilizing the country's abundant natural resources. Joint ventures with Chinese companies are not mentioned, although these play a major role in realizing this policy.

In 2007, natural disasters combined with an inefficient agriculture, the lack of fertilizer and other inputs, and reduced inflows of outside resources have led to the anticipation of another food shortage in North Korea by outside observers for 2008. This is being confirmed by the editorial, stating in dramatic words that "today there is no more urgent and important task but resolving the issue of people's food". The solution is sought in new high-yield varieties and potato farming; new ownership and incentive structures in agriculture are not mentioned.

Remarks on the other economic sectors contain no new messages. The role of the Cabinet is again stressed, demanding that all economic activities are strictly organized under its supervision. The Party is asked to enhance political awareness, the youth should actively participate in the hardest work and the Party's vanguard, and unions and other organizations should continue their work as educators of the people so that these play their role in society properly.

The inter-Korean summit meeting and the resulting October 4th declaration are described as significant events towards advancing national unification, although the tone is quite sober and does not resemble the excitement of the comments on the first summit of the year 2000. Anticipating the new pro-U.S. government in Seoul, it is stressed that Koreans should not let their desire for unification and their independent efforts at achieving this goal be hampered by outside forces: "The main agent of the national reunification movement is the Korean nation, and dependence on outside forces will never settle the country's reunification issue." Especially, "pro-U.S. sycophancy and treachery" shall not be tolerated, and "the war moves of the hawks at home and abroad" shall be foiled. The conclusion of a peace treaty to end the Korean War and the removal of U.S. troops from South Korea are presented as major policy goals.

In comparison with the 2007 issue, the return to old postures (socialism, Party, domestic resources) is the most striking difference. IT, standing at the core of the 2007 editorial, has not been mentioned in 2008; neither has the status as a nuclear power. Improving the standard of living is again an issue, but its coverage was less intense in 2008. The Cabinet has been further upgraded from being an "important" institution to the "unified command". The goal of reunification is still a major theme, but the optimistic time-frame of 2007 ("in our generation") has been silently dropped. The insecurity about the future political course of the new government in South Korea has been reflected by the absence of any specific attacks against the president or his party; the Grand National Party has received much more direct criticism in the 2007 editorial but has not been directly mentioned in the 2008 version.

To sum it up, the 2008 editorial marks a return to traditional political positions. The North Korean leadership entrenches and gets ready for defense.

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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