



Policy Forum 12-03: The Post Kim Jong-il Era and the 2013 Regime in South Korea



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By Nak-chung Paik

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I. Introduction

Nak-chung Paik, Editor of The Quarterly Changbi and Professor Emeritus of English Literature at Seoul National University, asks "Which will be the greater variable, the leadership change in North Korea or the 2013 regime change in South Korea?" Paik asserts that since the North Korean

succession does not show signs of sparking an imminent political or social upheaval, South Korea, with upcoming elections, has the opportunity to engage North Korea, establish a peace agreement and perhaps eventually an inter-Korean confederation. The key, Paik writes, is the 2013 South Korean regime: "Will we content ourselves with the same old ruling forces who have changed face and succeeded in "differentiation from Lee Myung-bak," or will we make the historic transition to a new epoch not only in the South but possibly shared by South and North?"

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II. Report by Nak-chung Paik

- "The Post Kim Jong-il Era and the 2013 Regime in South Korea"

by Nak-chung Paik

The sudden death of North Korean National Defense Commission chairman Kim Jong-il was a major event for the whole of the Korean Peninsula. Even western media that ordinarily pay little attention to the Korean Peninsula dedicated major coverage to it, issuing a torrent of commentary on how events would proceed in the "post-Kim Jong-il era." Everyone is naturally curious to see what shape the Kim Jong-un era will take.

But another question comes to mind: Which will be the greater variable, the leadership change in the North or the 2013 regime in the South? Certainly, the sudden passing of their leader would be the biggest event for our fellow Koreans in the North. But in terms of the long-range outlook for the Korean Peninsula as a whole, an even more important issue may be the success or failure of the 2013 regime—in other words, whether we in the South can make the year 2013, when the next administration takes office, into as great a turning point for South Korean society as it previously experienced in the aftermath of the June democratization struggle in 1987.

The Need to Distinguish the Top Leader's Sudden Death from a "Sudden Upheaval"

Such reflection is brought on by increasing evidence that the North had established a system to ensure that the sudden death of its leader would not necessarily lead to an upheaval for the country. Whether that system is democratic or socialist in nature is a separate issue; indeed, its dynastic character seems conspicuous. In her memoirs, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright writes that Kim Jong-il expressed great interest in Thailand's constitutional monarchy. Although the North Korean political system is a long way from the Thai one in terms of both its form and content, there certainly are similarities between the transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un and the ascendance of a crown prince installed in preparation for the passing of the elderly monarch. Had observers taken note of such preparations, they would not have rushed to prognosticate a "sudden upheaval." Once we note the "dynastic" character of the Northern system, the fact that Kim Jong-un, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party, is relatively young and has had less time than his father did to train for the succession would not seem to pose any major problems in the near future. More preparations were needed for the first hereditary succession—and the difficulties arguably greater as well—because of the overwhelming stature of President Kim Il-sung as the founding father of the country, the suddenness of his passing, and the nature of the succession process as the first confirmation of the "dynastic" transformation of a country founded upon the stated goal of a Communist revolution. In contrast, the third-generation transfer followed the path already laid down by the second-generation one, in a society where it has come to be

generally accepted that no one could possibly rise to the position of supreme leader who did not come from the family of Kim Il-sung (the so-called “Paektu bloodline”). At the same time, just as Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il differed in their governing practices despite representing the same ‘unitary system’, one should expect the Kim Jong-un regime to take shape in the course of further modifications. Kim Jong-il may have wielded absolute authority, but he did so under a certain compromise with the country’s military—in the name of the so-called “Military First [Songun]” policy—and as neither “the Great Leader [suryong]” nor “President,” titles forever reserved for his deceased father. In the same way, even if Kim Jong-un is enthroned as a sacred and inviolable figure akin to the Japanese emperor of pre-1945 days, it is likely that his actual rule will proceed in yet another arrangement with the elite groups in the party and the military. The fate of the Kim Jong-un era will hinge upon how well-suited to the reality that arrangement proves, and how much political ability the “Comrade General” exhibits.

The Building of the 2013 Regime as a Key Variable

In any event, the “uncertainty” of the situation on the peninsula has diminished in some respects with the receding of the scenario equating the uncertain state of Kim Jong-il’s physical health with the potential for a “sudden upheaval” for the North Korean regime. At the same time, the importance of whether the South Korean people are capable of building the 2013 regime has arguably grown all the more. At root, that importance has to do with the disparity in national power between South and North Korea. Because the disparity between them in economic might and influence within the international community is so great, what choice South Korean society makes is ultimately bound to hold greater weight. This general consideration aside, a look back at how decisive the Lee Myung-bak administration’s role has been in making a muddle of the situation on the Korean Peninsula drives home the South Korean government’s pivotal role in peninsular issues.

It would be a different story, of course, if an upheaval actually occurs in North Korea. And who among us can say what will or will not happen in the distant future? But even in the medium term, China’s determination or ability to forestall any sudden North Korean upheaval does not seem likely to diminish substantially; and for the present, a relatively orderly transfer of power seems to be under way, with Washington, Moscow, and Tokyo joining Beijing in clamoring for “stability first,” lest things should proceed other than smoothly. Even the Lee Myung-bak administration, though exhibiting its trademark boorishness and lack of conviction, has evidently opted in the end for maintaining stability.

Among variables outside South Korea, the more worrisome prospect is that Republicans will win the presidency in the 2012 U.S. elections. For even Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, reputed to be the moderate among candidates for Republican nomination, has been seen making a number of extreme right-wing pledges. But even if the worst happens and the Republican Party comes to power, this probably will not make the 2013 regime an utter impossibility. Unlike the early 2000s when George W. Bush was elected president, the U.S. today has a national economy in tatters and conspicuously weaker influence on the international stage. Under these circumstances, a president elected on platforms that seemingly have abandoned any rational state management would be hard pressed to show the kind of muscle Bush did on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. He may manage to cause problems and create harassment, but not completely frustrate positive outcomes, when the people of South Korea have chosen a new beginning in 2012.

The North Korea Variable in the Building of the 2013 Regime

As studies and discussions currently taking place in various areas suggest, the 2013 regime promises a sea change for South Korean society. It has set a number of tasks, including a leap into a new stage of the democratization of the ‘87 regime, the reversing of the trend of severe polarization,

the shifting of the national model to an eco-friendly welfare society, and the regeneration of the social atmosphere of respect for the basic virtues of justice, solidarity, and trust. One of the key tasks in this—indeed, one that will, in some sense, determine the success or failure of all the others—is that of making historic advances in the effort to overcome the division system on the Korean Peninsula.

The reason I call for “historic advances” rather than the division system’s “dissolution” is because we are still a long way from completely overcoming the division system, which has hardened into place since the Korean War armistice of 1953. Nevertheless, one thing is clear, namely that replacing the armistice agreement with a peace agreement represents a prerequisite for the success of the 2013 regime. If the new administration is incapable of doing even that much, it will not succeed in reining in the forces that hindered the democratic reform efforts of the ‘87 regime. To be sure, even a peace agreement is a tall order, one that requires the consent of the North and the cooperation of the other nations involved, the U.S. especially. It will only be possible after some measure of trust has been built between Seoul and Pyongyang and between Washington and Pyongyang with the resumption of the six-party talks and at least some substantial headway in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. All of this, however, falls within the purview of “the instructions bequeathed by Kim Jong-il,” and Pyongyang is likely to pursue it to ensure the secure establishment of the Kim Jong-un era. The larger goal of the 2013 regime—that of building an inter-Korean confederation—is an issue of a rather different order. This, too, is included in the June 15 Joint Declaration, a legacy of the Kim Jong-il administration, and preparatory efforts were actually initiated through the October 4 Declaration. However, a new strategic resolve will be needed for North Korea actually to accept this confederation or association of states. It is unclear at this point whether the Kim Jong-un regime will come to have the will or capability to do so, but if the surrounding conditions improve—and, in particular, if the people of South Korea wisely pursue reconciliation and cooperation with the North—then I would not necessarily preclude its realization during the next president’s term.

In any event, South Korea should hasten to resume aid to North Korea and the Mt. Kumkang tourism even during the remaining time under the Lee administration. By increasing economic collaboration and carrying out senior-level meetings, we must manage the “North Korean variable” in such a way as to accord with the interests of the Republic of Korea and the wishes of the majority of the population of the Korean Peninsula. Doing so will go some way to lessen the blemishes in the administration’s record, and will make it that much easier to surmount the ‘87 regime. Conversely, failure to do even that much will only make the need for a new regime in the South all the more urgent.

The 2013 Regime Is Coming

Signs of the coming of the 2013 regime were everywhere apparent in South Korea during 2011. Most notably, there were the Seoul mayoral by-election of October and the so-called “Ahn Cheol-soo” phenomenon, [1] and the fact that Kim Jin-suk was able to come back alive from her 309-day aerial protest at Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction on the strength of the support from all corners of society, including the Hope Bus campaign. [2] At the heart of these changes, many analysts have observed, stands a public in unprecedented close connection and mutual communication through the new medium of SNS (social networking service). But the decisive element here is the fact that the same public is prepared for offline action as well whenever the situation calls for it. In this context, the end of the Kim Jong-il era also has served as a reminder that change, at any rate, is inevitable. This is not to raise farfetched expectations for an imminent Jasmine Revolution of a North Korean variety, but the South Korean people’s desire for a new era has been strengthened, with fresh evidence of how ill-equipped the old entrenched forces are to gauge the Northern situation with any

realism and to manage with any wisdom the peninsula's division.

The fact that lawmaker Park Geun-hye, the ruling party's leading presidential candidate, has moved into the foreground sooner than expected as chairwoman of the Grand National Party's emergency committee seems to be another sign presaging the 2013 regime. As an election on the platform of "carrying on the Lee Myung-bak legacy" is obviously out of the question, Park was expected all along to step forward at some point. But her original strategy presumably was to remain a bit longer behind a veil of mystery while keeping a distance from the President, then suddenly coming into sight like a comet shortly before the general elections. But a rapidly changing situation did not allow such elegant "image politics." She was forced to campaign for the GNP candidate Na Kyung-won (whom she did not personally favor) during the Seoul mayoral race, only to end up bruised for her efforts, and even her earlier-than-expected "taking the mound" as head of the GNP emergency committee came only after a rocky process. In any case, we do have a different ball game now that the ace relief pitcher is on the mound. If the Park Geun-hye leadership does show enough communication and problem-solving ability in the days ahead to lead the party to victory in April's general election, her presidential prospects will be buoyed substantially. If not, the ruling party's best card for the presidential election may well have been prematurely thrown away. The possibility certainly remains that the opposition will bring defeat upon itself due to internal divisions. The past few months have seen partial unities achieved, with the formation of the Democratic Unity Party and United Progressive Party respectively, and the reduction in the number of parties to bring together represents, at least, some progress. It is still anyone's guess, however, whether there will be an additional integration or electoral alliance between those two parties. After all, achieving an alliance between different parties in a National Assembly election is many times more difficult than settling on a single presidential candidate with a view to a coalition government. And the "Ahn Cheol-soo phenomenon" remains another variable, symbolizing as it does the power of voters who do not support any political party. An opposition that can't even achieve an alliance within itself would be hard pressed to draw them in.

The key, once again, is the 2013 regime. Will we content ourselves with the same old ruling forces who have changed face and succeeded in "differentiation from Lee Myung-bak," or will we make the historic transition to a new epoch not only in the South but possibly shared by South and North? If enough South Koreans only summon their passion and wisdom to opt for the difficult but exhilarating path of adventure, there is no reason they cannot come up with a realistic means of overcoming the big hurdle of the Assembly elections. For there will be much less room for the inertia and the petty self-seeking among politicians, and at the same time there will be a more clear-eyed realization that looking for an overly neat solution while living under the division system represents another sign of inert behavior. More than anything else, it depends on each of us carrying on our efforts with real conviction, opening our hearts to the signs of the coming of the 2013 regime. In his "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley wrote, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" We should perhaps rephrase it and ask, "If Spring is coming, can Winter hold out for long?"

III. References

[1] Ahn Cheol-soo, a successful IT businessman turned pro-reform professor, emerged during the Seoul mayoral race last year as a powerful political alternative for a great number of South Korean people disillusioned with the existing political parties and politicians. Although he has never formally declared his running in the upcoming presidential election, he has maintained a frontrunner in surveys of possible presidential candidates and established himself as an icon of fundamental change in South Korean politics.

[2] The Hope Bus campaign was launched to support Kim Jin-suk and other union members who had been protesting against Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction layoff plans. People from all over the country got on board the Hope Buses and gathered in the shipyard where Kim protested to show their powerful feeling of solidarity.

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

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