



Policy Forum 09-062: Why is North Korea so Aggressive? Kim Jong-il's Illness and North Korea's Changing Governing Style



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Why is North Korea so Aggressive? Kim Jong-il's Illness and North Korea's Changing Governing Style

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By Choi Jinwook

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Choi Jinwook](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Choi Jinwook, Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), writes, "North Korea has taken a harsher position since Kim Jong-il's illness. It is not the Department of United Front but the military that plays a more important role in inter-Korean relations... The decision to launch a long-range rocket and carry out a nuclear test was clearly made by the military, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The military seems to believe that it needs to become a nuclear power rather than try to resume talks with the United States at an earlier date."

II. Article by Choi Jinwook

- "Why is North Korea so Aggressive? Kim Jong-il's Illness and North Korea's Changing Governing Style"

By Choi Jinwook

Kim Jong-il's health problems seem to be affecting North Korea's governing style, which has great impact on its internal and external policies. For more than a decade, North Korea's political system has been characterized by its Military-First Policy, under which the principle of rule by man triumphed over rule by law, and decision-making was highly centralized in the person of Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-il wanted to directly control core organs of the Party, the Military, and the State, often bypassing the party.

Kim Jong-il also wanted to divide and rule party and military apparatus in order to prevent a particular organ from becoming too powerful. For example, the KWP's Department of Guidance and Organization, traditionally the most powerful organ in socialist countries, was not as powerful as it was during the era of Kim Il Sung after one of its major functions, supervising the Secret Police and Prosecutors' Office, was transferred to the newly created Department of Administration under the leadership of Chang Sung-taek. The military was also divided into three branches: the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, General Political Affairs, and General Staff, as Kim Jong-il directly gave orders to General Political Affairs and General Staff by bypassing the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. Thus, these three organs became equal rather than hierarchical. All core organs such as the Department of Guidance and Organization, the Department of Administration, and the Department of United Front of KWP, the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, General Political Affairs, General Staff, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Security Agency, and the Ministry of People's Security have checked and balanced each other under the single strong leader, Kim Jong-il.

However, this governing style faced a dramatic change as Kim Jong-il abruptly fell sick in August 2008 and was unable to play a pivotal role as a control tower any more. Kim's inexperienced, 26 year old son was unofficially nominated as his successor. Chang Sung-taek, Kim's brother-in-law, came to coordinate internal and external policies in the name of Kim. Institutionally, North Korea expanded and strengthened the National Defense Commission (NDC) by including all the important figures from the Military, Secret Police, and the Second Economy.

The National Defense Commission in the 11th and 12th Supreme People's Assembly

	National Defense Commission of the 11th Supreme People's Assembly (2003. 9. 3)	National Defense Commission of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (2009. 4. 9)
Chairman	Kim Jong-il (KWP's Secretary General, Supreme Commander)	Kim Jong-il (KWP's Secretary General, Supreme Commander)
First Deputy Chairman	Jo Myong-rok (Director General of Political Affairs)	Jo Myong-rok (Director General of Political Affairs)

Deputy Chairman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yon Hyong-muk (Chief Secretary, Jakang Province) • Lee Yong-mu (Vice Marshal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kim Young-chun (Minister of People's Armed Forces) • Lee Yong-mu (Vice Marshal) • Oh Kuk-ryul (Minister of Department of Operation, KWP)
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kim Young-chun (Chief of General Staff, KPA) • Chun Byung-ho (Minister of Military Industry, KWP) • Kim Il-chul (Minister of People's Armed Forces) • Paik Se-bong (Chairman of the Second Economy) • Choi Yong-su (Minister of People's Security) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chun Byung-ho (Minister of Military Industry, KWP) • Kim Il-chul (First Vice Minister of People's Armed Forces) • Paik Se-bong (Chairman of the Second Economy) • Chang Sung-taek (Minister of Administration, KWP) • Choo Sang-sung (Minister of People's Security) • Woo Dong-cuk (First Vice Minister of National Security Agency) • Choo Kyu-chang (First Vice Minister of Military Industry, KWP) • Kim Jong-kak (First Vice Director General of Political Affairs)

KWP: Korea Workers' Party KPA: Korean People's Army

The larger and stronger NDC signifies the end of the "divide and rule" governing style under the Military-First Policy, by which there was little communication between core organs of the Party, the Military and the State, as Kim Jong-il deliberately controlled each organ one-on-one. The walls between the organs within the NDC have now shrunk, however, as they belong to the same committee and communicate more easily and freely without Kim Jong-il's one-on-one control.

There is also a big difference between those within the NDC and those outside the NDC in terms of policy influence. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of United Front, which are not included in the NDC cannot input their views in the decision making process, while the military and the secret police are overrepresented. Under the Military-First Policy, the Minister of United Front and the Minister of Foreign Affairs have taken responsibility for policies towards inter-Korean relations and relations with the United States, respectively, under the auspices of Kim Jong-il. The department heads Kim Yang-kun and Kang Seok-ju have not had a chance to speak with Kim Jong-il since his sickness. Moreover, Chang Sung-taek, who has been believed to coordinate policies since Kim's sickness, tends to listen carefully to the voice of the military to secure its support for the succession process. The military also became a single giant entity under the leadership of Kim Young Chun, Minister of People's Armed Forces.

The rise of Chang Sung-taek and the military seems to have made North Korea's internal and external policies more aggressive. Particularly since last year, North Korea has tightened social control under the leadership of Chang. North Korea restricts market activities, emphasizes labor mobilization under the slogan of "150 days combat," and tries to renovate the city of Pyongyang, including efforts to establish the Ministry of Capital City Construction.

North Korea has taken a harsher position since Kim Jong-il's illness. It is not the Department of United Front but the military that plays a more important role in inter-Korean relations. Major General Kim Young-chul, NDC's director for policy, together with six military officers, made an on-the-spot check at the Kaesung Industrial Park on November 6, 2008, which was an obvious sign that the military is now in charge of Kaesung. The military played a major role in escalating tensions in inter-Korean relations since it announced on January 17, 2009 that North Korea would enter into a total confrontation mode with the South. It was also the military that demanded the US \$300 of wage for workers and US \$500 million of rent for Kaesung. The decision to launch a long-range rocket and carry out a nuclear test was clearly made by the military, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The military seems to believe that it needs to become a nuclear power rather than try to resume talks with the United States at an earlier date.

The North Korean military, excluding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of United Front, seems to dominate the decision making process after the deterioration of Kim's health. However, their decisions are provocative, unprofessional, and even unpredictable rather than well designed and manipulated. North Korea is truly at a critical point.

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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[Return to top](#)

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