

“Yes I Can!” Byungjin and Kim Jong Un’s Strategic Patience



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NAPSNET Special Report

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I. INTRODUCTION

North Korea upgraded its nuclear and military power and grew its economy slightly, thereby realizing Kim Jong Un's *byungjin* line. It also attempted to open new external fronts and to coerce the South to cooperate on its terms, but failed. Instead, it retreated into a repaired relationship with China.

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II. SPECIAL REPORT BY PETER HAYES AND ROGER CAVAZOS

“Yes I Can!” *Byungjin* and Kim Jong Un’s Strategic Patience

INTRODUCTION

North Korea’s Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un set out in 2015 to consolidate the foundations of his rule. “This year,” he stated, “we will further consolidate our country’s invincible might as a socialist political and ideological power.”^[1] The record shows uneven progress in each dimension of his rule. Kim’s signature “*byungjin* line” (that is, the parallel development of the economy and nuclear weapons) appears to be working—albeit very slowly, and without rectifying the major deficits in conventional military forces, especially airpower. Thus, as 2015 ends, he can safely say “Yes I can!” in response to external skeptics, especially in the Obama White House.

On the external front, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) suffered a series of setbacks and retreated by repairing its damaged relationship with China. Admittedly, this alignment is based purely on geostrategic joint interest, which could change tomorrow. But so long as Kim does not overly disturb regional and Korean Peninsula strategic stability, China will not abandon his regime. Thus, Kim appears to have adopted a cautious approach that may be described as strategic patience, that is, a willingness to wait out American refusal to engage on terms acceptable to the regime while riding out the storms of criticism from the international community on its appalling human rights record.

THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL FRONT

Kim Jong Un consolidated his rule in 2015 by removing senior officials, including the purging of Defense Minister Hyon Yong Chol; conducting roughly four on-the-spot guidance visits per week; allowing informal and sanctioned market-based growth; and confronting external powers. This combination of controls may be called nascent Kim Jong Un-ism; it generates internal compressive stress, one measure of which is the migration rate of North Koreans. Departure of “ordinary” North

Koreans was down as of mid-2015, due to a crackdown on cross-border movement and slightly improved economic conditions inside the DPRK.^[ii] Conversely, the number of senior officials defecting from the DPRK or while on overseas postings has reportedly increased, indicating that regime elites increasingly fear Kim's leadership style.^[iii]

The convening in 2015 of enlarged Politburo meetings and the announcement that a Korean Workers' Party Congress is to convene after a 36-year hiatus suggest that Kim is enlarging the domain of his personal power and expanding the range of his political charisma beyond that achieved by his notoriously technocratic and publicity-shy father, Kim Jong Il.

THE ECONOMIC FRONT

The prospects for the North Korean economy looked dim at the start of 2015. The self-imposed Ebola virus travel ban inhibited tourism. North Korea also faced a severe drought that worsened hydroelectricity shortages. Yet agriculture appears to have had a bumper crop, largely due to an increase in the private share of agricultural production. The service sector has also grown quickly in the major cities. Large formal markets operate fairly consistently,^[iv] and home-based and street-corner vendors meet much local demand. Kim's economic on-the-spot guidance highlighted food production and the service sector, such as terrapin, catfish, or vegetable producers.^[v] Thus, Kim can fairly claim to be bringing about the "upturn in improving the people's living standards" demanded in his New Year's speech.

Overall, real growth may be as high as 4% for 2015, in spite of declining terms of trade with China for coal exports, reduced trade overall with China (down in the first three quarters of 2015 by 17% by one estimate, due largely to China's economic downturn), and sanctions on North Korean trade. In February 2015 China rejected North Korean entry into the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—a severe blow to North Korea's economic future.

THE MILITARY FRONT

"This year," Kim declared in his New Year's address, "the People's Army should thoroughly establish the Party's monolithic command system across the entire army." He directed the military to "effect a turnaround in improving the quality of training by eliminating formalism and stereotyped patterns in combat and political training," to "maintain full combat readiness," and to "provide soldiers with better living conditions." This list of shortfalls suggests that all is not well in the Korean People's Army.

In the first six months of 2015, the DPRK regime issued threats of war and nuclear war against the United States and South Korea (Republic of Korea, ROK). The DPRK asserted its right to launch long-range rockets and satellites, and (less often) referred ambiguously to a fourth nuclear test. In May, the DPRK conducted an underwater rocket launch test near Wonsan.

Kim reportedly tried to obtain modern surface-to-air missiles from Russia, but was rebuffed.^[vi] This blocked the Korean People's Army from countering the near-absolute US-ROK aerial warfare superiority over the entire Peninsula. In spite of the bluster, the DPRK conducted no long-range rocket or nuclear tests in 2015. US officials stated that the DPRK can miniaturize nuclear warheads and mate them with missiles,^[vii] and the DPRK claimed in May 2015 to have done so.^[viii] However, the ROK vice minister of defense stated in October that the DPRK had not yet achieved this capability.^[ix] Nonetheless, it is likely that the DPRK is developing its nuclear arsenal. In February 2015, Witt and Ahn forecast that by 2020, the country could have as few as 20 and as many as 100 plutonium or uranium-based nuclear warheads.^[x]

Lacking “assured retaliation” capability, North Korea is still unable to actually do anything with its nuclear weapons—especially since the United States and the ROK reportedly adopted, in November, a new war plan to strike preemptively at the earliest signs of nuclear or missile attack from the DPRK.^[xi] Some—including Kim Jong-Un himself—attributed the high-level dialogue and resulting agreement, following the August 2015 artillery shootout (described in the next section), to the DPRK’s nuclear weapons.^[xii] However, Robert Jervis and Robert Carlin note that overt and covert attacks by the DPRK on the ROK pre-date its nuclear weapons and that the number and intensity of such attacks is unrelated to its current nuclear armament.^[xiii]

THE INTER-KOREAN FRONT

Kim began 2015 by holding out the hope that he might meet with South Korean President Park Geun Hye and that North and South Korea would “briskly hold dialogue, negotiations and exchanges and make contact ... resume the suspended high-level contacts and hold sectoral talks.” Five days after his New Year’s Speech, a civil society group scattered anti-North leaflets carried by balloons from the South. The DPRK demanded in late January that the ROK government suppress such activities or it would suspend the proposed inter-Korean dialogue.^[xiv] In early February, North Korea fired short-range missiles and denounced the US-ROK exercises due to begin in March. It then imposed a 5% wage increase for North Korean workers at the joint Kaesong Industrial Complex—the sole remaining active inter-Korean cooperation project that straddles a militarily sensitive area north of the DMZ around the North Korean city of Kaesong, an area controlled by the Korean People’s Army. The status of the Kaesong Industrial Complex is a key litmus test of North Korea’s ultimate intention with regard to inter-Korean relations.

On March 2, the Korean People’s Army threatened to turn the South into a “sea of fire” and declared the pending exercises “nuclear war drills to invade North Korea.” On March 30, the North threatened to “punish the South mercilessly” for allowing a UN human rights office in Seoul. On April 24, a North Korean spokesman stated: “Don’t even dream about having talks with us.” On May 8, the DPRK warned that it would fire on South Korean vessels crossing the northern limit line. On May 13, it threatened to withdraw North Korean workers from the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

The ROK responded in kind. At her May 14 meeting with the Committee for the Five Northern Korean Provinces, maintained by the ROK as part of its assertion of sovereignty over the DPRK, President Park criticized the North on human rights and military tension, and reasserted her line on “peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula.”^[xv] She continued on May 19, referring to the North’s “reign of terror” at the Asia Leadership Conference.

North Korea responded via *Uriminzokkiri*, a state-controlled propaganda website run from China. Translated, *uriminzokkiri* means “our race, ourselves,” which draws on a common formulation of Korean nationalists in both Koreas by appealing to “the race and nation,” intended here to contrast to South Korea’s imputed dependency on the United States with the DPRK’s putative independence on the one hand, and to deflect third countries from joining anti-DPRK coalitions or to favor South over North Korean trade on the other. *Uriminzokkiri* described Park as an “old madwoman crazed with hostility toward her own people.”^[xvi] Thus, May 24 was not an auspicious moment for the Women Cross DMZ delegation to enter the South, across the DMZ, from the North.

By late July, North Korea had apparently decided to use military force. On August 4, two South Korean soldiers were maimed by landmine explosions in the DMZ. The UN Command determined that North Korea had planted the mines. In retaliation, Seoul resumed its propaganda broadcasts. On August 20, North Korea fired a rocket, followed by three artillery shells, toward loudspeakers broadcasting South Korea’s anti-North propaganda. The South fired back artillery shells near North Korean guard posts.

On August 22, the two Koreas began marathon high-level talks at Panmunjon, reaching a six-point agreement on August 26 in which North Korea expressed regret over the landmines and South Korea agreed to halt anti-Pyongyang broadcasts. The only substantive commitment in the agreement was to hold family reunions, which took place in two sessions in late October. On October 25, even as the families met, the South fired warning shots at a North Korean patrol boat near the disputed northern limit line west of the Peninsula.

In mid-October, the DPRK was internally focused on staging a gigantic anniversary party for the 70th anniversary of its founding. The train of hostility in the first nine months of the year unleashed by Kim deepened Park's innate caution and distrust, undermining inter-Korean relations and jettisoning any prospect of high-level dialogue, let alone a summit meeting.

THE DIPLOMATIC-EXTERNAL FRONT

In his New Year's speech, Kim stated that because the DPRK is "surrounded by hostile states and enemies," the DPRK must go it alone. But he also stated that the DPRK would "expand and develop foreign relations in a multilateral and positive way."

In this multilateral strategy, Kim may be viewed as implementing his own version of what the United States termed strategic patience: maneuvering between the external powers to gain time in which to consolidate his domestic strategies, while out-waiting the United States.

Integral to this strategy was repairing hostile relations with China to sustain economic support, without which domestic stability is not possible in the DPRK. The DPRK resumed more or less normal low-level political and commercial relations with China by mid-2015.

By the time the Chinese Communist Party convened its Fifth Plenum in October, the DPRK had attacked the South with artillery but then reached the inter-Korean agreement in August that reduced tensions on the Peninsula to "normal" levels. This confrontation discomfited the Chinese greatly, especially given the South Korean defense minister's reference on August 24 to drawing US strategic bombers into the region,^[xvii] and undoubtedly cemented China's decision to reaffirm its support for stability in North Korea, which China's leaders view as best achieved under Kim's rule. The key signal of this shift was China's decision to send fifth-ranking Politburo member Liu Yunshan to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers Party in October. The bizarre last minute recall of Kim Jong Un's favorite band just before it was to perform in Beijing on December 12, 2015 showed the limits of this relationship, however. The Chinese leadership balked at implicitly blessing Kim's missile and nuclear program when they informed the DPRK that senior Chinese party leaders would not attend the performance if it included a song using a background video of the North's 2012 missile launch, leading to the North's decision to cancel the performance altogether.^[xviii]

Thus, China's decision to back Kim's rule so long as he maintains domestic order and does not disrupt regional security affairs underpins Kim's policy of strategic patience. On other external fronts, the DPRK pursued pragmatic goals, for example transporting Russian coal sent by railway to Rajin's ice-free port and then by ship into the South; and keeping Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo guessing as to whether the North is serious about resolving the abductee issue in return for limited sanctions relief.

In his New Year's Speech, Kim blamed the United States directly for the DPRK's strategic insecurity, asserting that it "and its vassal forces" use human rights to force it to denuclearize and aim to "stifle" the DPRK by force. He called on the United States to "boldly make a policy switch." In January and February, American and North Korean officials discussed North Korean "pre-steps"

needed to resume talks.^[xix] However, the two sides could not bridge the gap, logistically or substantively, to achieve this.^[xx] When the DPRK hailed the knifing of Mark Lippert, US Ambassador to South Korea, by a crazed individual in Seoul, calling it a “knife shower of justice,”^[xxi] it effectively terminated talks in Washington. In any case, it was already evident that US-DPRK talks depended on the six-power talks with Iran in July. Once that deal was struck, in mid-September, it became equally clear that the White House would not re-engage the North during the US presidential election campaign due to Obama’s risk aversion to re-engaging Kim Jong Un after the February 2012 imbroglio combined with the need to avoid putting Democratic presidential candidates at risk during the campaign competition with Republican front runners such as Donald Trump.

Given these setbacks on multiple fronts, the DPRK reverted to one of its standard formulas by proposing a peace treaty between the United States and the DPRK on October 1, 2015, at the UN General Assembly. The United States swiftly rejected it. Trapped in old habits, this nagging, repetitive demand was disconnected from the DPRK’s strategic circumstances and revealed more about its powerlessness, rather than any ability to match the United States by taking a decisive, bold step such as Kim proposed for the United States in January.

CONCLUSION

When outlining his 2015 agenda, Kim Jong Un referred to the “revolutionary spirit of Paektu,” defined as “a staunch fighting spirit of rising up no matter how often one may fall and fighting it out.” This endless “try, try again” approach is the essence of Kim’s conservative strategy. The results were uneven in 2015. He honed his “sacred nuclear sword” without displaying it (which would risk preemptive attack or a display of failure in testing due to unreliability). At the same time, he improved the livelihood of significant fractions of the DPRK population by focusing resources on the military, agriculture, and the service sector.

On the external front, his performance was poor. His efforts to re-engage Russia and Japan mostly failed to deliver any political or economic gains. After major setbacks in tackling the next target of opportunity, South Korea, and making no inroads whatsoever in engaging the US, Kim repaired relations with China—in effect, a strategic retreat. Overall, given his relatively weak position, Kim pursued regime survival by maneuvering in the increasingly restricted space between the external powers that surround the DPRK, and adopting a stance of strategic patience that mirrors that of the US toward the DPRK.

In short, he consolidated his immediate powers. It remains uncertain how long he can sustain them, given the sheer stresses induced by his domestic rule, and the external pressure applied by sanctions and self-imposed isolation. In this regard, collapsists such as Jamie Metzl remain eternally optimistic,^[xxii] but optimism, even cautious optimism, is a poor basis for a realistic policy toward a state armed with nuclear weapons, and with a young leader determined to rule for decades.^[xxiii]

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