



Response to “Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced?”

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, ["Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced?"](#) by Rudiger Frank, Professor of East Asian Economy and Society and Vice Director of the East Asian Institute at the University of Vienna, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 08-080A: October 21st, 2008.

This response includes comments by John J. Tkacik, Jr., Senior Research Fellow in Asian Studies at the Heritage Foundation.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the

official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Comments by John J. Tkacik, Jr.

Ruediger Frank is, of course, the expert on North Korean leadership dynamics, so I would defer to his expertise on the matter, but I wonder if he may be overlooking the legitimating power of the "Songun" (Soengun) ideology as he predicts "collective leadership" after Kim Jong Il's passing - whenever that happy moment may arrive.

Having observed the Chinese Communist Party's doctrinal wars as they unfolded in the 1960-70s, and the tensions between CCP factions and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), I see parallel processes now at work in the DPRK. "Songun" doctrine seems to be a profoundly important instrument of legitimatization for the Korean People's Army. I wonder if the KPA would be comfortable with a "collective leadership" -- one of which the Army is only a part -- that might be tempted to dismantle "Songun."

The KPA presumably wants to remain "first", to retain its preeminence over the "workers and peasants" and everyone else. But the KPA surely needs someone - other than the Army - to lead the North Korean people in the "Songun!" ("Army First") cheer. So far, hasn't that voice had to come from an unbiased source, an authoritative source - from the "Dear Leader"?

North Koreans listen to "Dear Leader" because he is the greatest genius ever produced by mankind. Why, he has even "perfected" the Juche doctrine of his father, himself a man of supernatural intellect. "Songun" is not just a codicil of the DPRK's founding myth of Juche. Rather, "Songun" is the "perfection" of Juche. "Songun Politics" is the State's most fundamental ideology which "overcame the limitations (!) of the preceding [Juche] theory."

And under "Songun," the Army is supreme. "Kim Jong Il started his Songun revolutionary leadership ...with his firm will to carry forward generation after generation the Juche cause of Songun pioneered by the President." Note that the "Leader" is carrying-forward Songun "generation after generation". Does this imply that the legitimacy of a successor leadership to Kim Jong Il will rest with the next generation of "Kims"?... It all looks like the Army will be inclined to find a new "leader" - not a "collective leadership" - to defend to the death.

Doesn't the Army need a "personality" rather than a "collective leadership"? When Dear Leader passes, the KPA (or the Korean Workers Party) can't just say "Surprise! Here's a new genius, whom we've picked off the streets who will reaffirm Songun." Rather, it seems likely that the Army has to say "Here's the son of the Dear Leader, Grandson of Great Leader, 'a stem of that victorious stock', and he's going to tell you that Songun is still the way to go."

Kim Jong Il appears to have devised "Songun" for exactly this purpose - to legitimate the military rule of the state in his name and the name of successor generations of Kims.

One perhaps should read this like a fundamentalist reads the Koran...

If the KPA or the KWP were poised to move away from rule by the Kim dynasts, wouldn't they precede this with some major redefinition of Songun politics that is not personality based before taking the next step? Otherwise, they will be inclined to anoint another Kim family member as their champion of Songun continuity to preserve the current military rule.

III. Response to the comments by John J. Tkacik, Jr. by Rudiger Frank

On the legitimating power of seongun: We should not forget that Seongun has from the outset been propagated as the Party's policy. I have argued myself that placing the Army before the Working Class was equivalent to pushing the Party into the background at the expense of the military. However, we should also be aware that such a separation makes little sense in practice, because most leading figures have double membership in both groups. Furthermore, I would argue that Seongun was not meant to replace the Party, but rather to serve as a new ideology for a new situation: the combination of Kim Il-sung's death, the unprecedented famine, and the renewed outside pressure. Seongun was also desired to remove any ideological contradictions between a working-class based ideology, in which economically successful individuals would have to be seen as class enemies, and a changed economic policy that at some point strongly promoted successful individual economic activities. Now that the July 2002 reform attempt have largely failed to deliver the expected results despite good intentions amid the failed normalization with Japan and the second nuclear crisis, and as North Korea is a nuclear state with threatened domestic stability, the reform spirit has vanished and has been replaced by a renewed emphasis on orthodox socialist positions, such as the statements in the Rodong Sinmun of Aug/Sept 2007 on the invincibility of socialism and the historic inevitability of its victory.

On the question whether the KPA would be comfortable with a collective leadership: Despite the Chinese example and knowing that the army in North Korea has for a long time been an independent economic player, I doubt that it will seriously try to play the role of an active, or dominating, political player. This is not to say that the military will not be part of the new collective leadership; but I also do not see an openly military dictatorship in North Korea coming.

On the question of Kim Jong-il being the puppet of the Military: It was Kim Il-sung's idea to have his son being close to the military, especially through his old comrade, the late O Jin-u. Kim Jong-il has for many years been personally responsible for major promotions in the KPA, so that all the high-ranking officers would be loyal towards him. This sense of loyalty not necessary includes respect; but in Korean politics, people think in terms of groups. So whether they like it or not, these officers are seen as members of the Kim Jong-il group, which in turn means envy from those who are not members. Their destiny is closely connected to the one of Kim Jong-il. If he makes sure that they will continue to be part of the new leadership system, they will cooperate - just like the South Korean military stayed in its barracks in 1993 despite the election of Kim Young-sam as President in December 1992.

On overcoming the limitations of the preceding theory: By "preceding theory", the North Korean media refer to Marxism and Soviet-style socialism, not to Juche. In at least one instance I read "the old theory, the one that was created one and a half centuries ago". Displaying Seongun as a continuation or development of Juche makes a lot of sense, exactly because Kim Jong-il cannot afford to revise anything that his father has done. However, the essence of Juche is to take whatever is out there and adapt it to the specific conditions of North Korea at a given time. As this "environment" changes, adjustments are ok. This is why the NK system needs a leader, because only he can decide what the appropriate adjustment is.

On the question of carrying forward the revolution: As I wrote earlier, generation after generation does not necessarily refer to the Kim family. It could also mean generation of revolutionaries. All North Koreans are children of Kim Il-sung, and their mother is the Party. I agree that the army will defend the Great Leader to the death, even if he is already dead. Hopefully not sounding blasphemous, but what was the reason for the crusades again? To liberate the holy land where Jesus was buried. So the leader does not necessarily be alive to be defended at all cost.

On the question whether personality rather than collective leadership is needed: This is a very valid point. It is indeed hard to imagine that as even South Korea can't give up its presidential system, the

North could do without a single strong man at the top. So I agree that we will see a new leader emerging, and the chances are good that he will come from the family, either one of the sons or Chang Song-taek or whoever. The crucial point is, however, that this will not be a Great Leader, but just a leader who governs the country in the name of the two unmatched geniuses. The first Pope was St. Peter, the senior disciple of Jesus.

On Kim Jong-il's use of seongun to legitimate the military's rule: I would even suspect that it was Kim Il-sung's idea. He knew that his son would not live forever, and he must have been thinking hard about what would come next. To repeat myself, it would be very difficult to justify if a descendant of Kim Il-sung would still be alive but not taking the job of top leader. However, the question is what kind of leader he will be. I believe he will govern as the head of a collective and share power as well as responsibility.

On the question whether a move away from Kim clan leadership wouldn't be preceded by a major redefinition of ideology: You are right. And I am sure that for the foreseeable future, leadership in Korea will continue to be personality based. However, the next leader will not be as strong as the two preceding ones. Let's not forget that Kim Il-sung has ruled the country that he founded for 32 years before announcing his successor in 1980, and then having another 14 years to give people time to get used to that before he passed on the helm. Kim Jong-il is in power for either 14 years, or 11 when we count 1997 as the starting year. His health seems to be not so good, so even if he announced a successor tomorrow, would he have enough time to really endorse him? I doubt this, especially since he has so far shown no sign of bringing himself into a position to pass on legitimacy. Expecting another family member to become leader is realistic; but his function will be very different from the one of the Great Leaders before, and he will share real power with a committee comprised of party officials and military officers (who are also party members).

IV. 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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