

Analysis of the 4th Session of the 12th SPA and Future Outlook: Focusing on Political Aspects

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The 4th Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly convened on April 7th. The much-anticipated promotion of successor Kim Jong Eun to a spot on the National Defense Commission was put off. Overall there was nothing particularly remarkable about this session, which only addressed the usual orders of business. The agenda of this session was to 1) review the cabinet's work in 2010 and tasks for 2011, 2) settle the 2010 budget and approve the 2011 budget, 3) address organizational issues. The following is an analysis of the main features of this session.

First, Chairman Kim Jong Il did not attend. This is nothing new, considering that he also failed to attend the 2nd Session, held on April 9th, 2010. The official reason for his absence, as reported by Chosun Central Broadcasting and other major North Korean media sources, was that Chairman Kim and his son Jong Eun were performing on-site guidance at a refining plant in Chagang Province and a diamond factory on the Amnok River, and thus we can assess that monitoring the situation in the provinces was one likely motivation. But the more practical reason is that, as this conference has no major political significance, the regime would rather emphasize Kim Jong Eun's image as a leader of "science and modernization" through on-site

guidance of relevant projects. Accordingly, the guidance visit to Chagang Province, a major hub for the munitions industry, appears intended to emphasize development of munitions production and also to convey a message about plans for privatization of the munitions industry, which is to be advanced scientifically using the "unique" new methods of the Kim Jong Eun era.

The second noteworthy feature is that Kim Jong Eun was not promoted to a seat on the NDC. Since Kim Jong Eun was internally approved as successor for all practical purposes in September 2010, there has been much speculation that Kim Jong Il would orchestrate his son's "expedited" rise to high status in order to ensure the early stabilization of the succession structure. Thus the question of whether Kim Jong Eun would join the NDC (the highest organ of state power under the Constitution) became an immediate focus of attention. Yet it appears the North Korean regime had other ideas. They seem to have judged that Kim Jong Eun, in his role as vice chair of the Party Central Military Committee, is sufficiently well positioned to amass achievements as successor and take control of projects in other areas as well. In actuality the Central Military Committee is equal in status to the Party Central Committee, which heads the state system, and thus it is capable of wielding enormous power. In light of this, we must surmise that Chairman Kim Jong Il is in unexpectedly good health. When Kim Jong Eun was installed as successor an "abrupt rise" was clearly considered, but as Kim Jong Il's health improved the leadership apparently decided to increase Kim Jong Eun's "practical leadership" ability as much as possible before passing on real responsibility to him. Meanwhile, the delay may also allow them time to put to rest the internal discontent over the succession system.

Third, Lee Myung Su was appointed head of the People's Safety Ministry. Lee Myung Su is widely acknowledged as one of Kim Jong Il's closest associates. This 74-year-old KPA lieutenant general first emerged as an associate of Kim Jong Il's in 1996 and became administrative director of the NDC in 2007, taking charge of daily operations on behalf of Kim Jong Il. The administrative director is in charge of surveillance and intelligence activities. Lee was standing beside Kim Jong Il when he uttered his famous phrase "Glory to the heroic Korean People's Army" on April 25th 1992 in Kim Il Sung Square on the 60th anniversary of the KPA's founding. According to former NIS Director Lim Dong Won, in April 2002 Lee Myung Su, who was at that time director of the KPA Operations Bureau, was the official who spread open a map and directly explained the problems related to opening the Gyeongui Railroad. This indicates that under the *songun* system the KPA even oversaw inter-Korean economic cooperation issues, and Lee Myung Su was at the core of that

work. Currently the Minister of People's Safety is a very important post. He must reassert control over the social and economic systems which have fallen into disorder due to the economic hardships and resolve various political problems which may erupt in the course of establishing the succession system. In particular, he is responsible for suppressing at an early stage any mass rioting which might occur. Thus he must be more faithful than any others in assisting the Kim Jong Il government.

A fourth development was the promotion of Park Do Chun to membership in the NDC. Park began as the Party Secretary of Jagang Province, the heartland of the munitions industry. In September 2010 he became a secretary of the Party Central Committee, where he seems to be in charge of handling military affairs. The fact that Park is replacing Chun Byeoung Ho, who had previously been in charge of the munitions industry, suggests that Chairman Kim wishes to make use of his experience developing the munitions industry in Jagang. Therefore it can be reasoned that this personnel appointment was made in preparation for the possible privatization of the munitions industry in the forthcoming Kim Jong Eun era. Furthermore, as DPRK-China economic cooperation heats up the Jagang region may become a strategic focal point, and therefore the guidance a man such as Park Do Chun, who has specialized knowledge of that region, will be essential.

In conclusion, this latest SPA session appears to have been a political function aimed at reaffirming that the direct governing system centered on Chairman Kim Jong Il will continue for some time to come. Kim Jong Il's plan is to continue to expand his son's power while he remains in good health, and then gradually hand over the supreme leadership role. In the process Kim Jong Eun must develop his own capabilities to their fullest extent and dispel the impression that his status as successor is solely due to his father's aura. Kim Il Sung dispelled the image of himself as a mere "Soviet puppet" by prevailing through various factional struggles, and Kim Jong Il eventually overcame the aura of his father and cemented his status as successor through hard work over a long period of time. Kim Jong Eun too must walk in the footsteps of his predecessors. How well he does will determine the speed of his rise to supreme commander. In particular, his success in reviving the economy and preventing sociopolitical upheaval will be an important indicator of his abilities.