

## North Korea's "Nuke-and-Missile Politics" Heading for Collapse, or a Transition Opportunity?

Cho Min

Senior Research Fellow, Center for Unification Policy Studies

Online Series CO 12-16

### 1. Forward to the Final Victory!

On April 15th a massive military parade was held in North Korea. Third-generation successor Kim Jong Eun spoke for about 20 minutes, concluding with the slogan "Forward to the Final Victory." In this way the supreme commander of the North Korean People's Army commanded his troops to march "forward" toward a "final victory" in which they will "hold high the sun banner of the Great Leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Eun." But throughout the speech his voice lacked a sense of inspiration, and the final gesture of commanding a forward charge was delivered in a manner completely unbecoming of a supreme commander.

With the completed Kim Jong Eun succession structure inheriting power from Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, the North Korean regime has now been ruled by the Kim family for three generations. At the 4<sup>th</sup> Party Delegates' Conference on April 11<sup>th</sup> Kim Jong Eun was appointed first secretary of the KWP and chairman of the Party Central Military Committee. Then on the 13<sup>th</sup> at the 5<sup>th</sup> Session of the 12<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly he was appointed first chairman of the National Defense Commission, the highest organ of state authority under the Constitution.

Kim Jong Il was declared “eternal chairman” of the NDC, while Kim Jong Eun has inherited the practical duties of that position and thus effectively ascended to the position of constitutional head of state. He had already taken command of the military, having been appointed supreme commander of the KPA on December 30<sup>th</sup> of last year, shortly after Kim Jong Il’s death. At the time North Korea said that this had been achieved by Chairman Kim Jong Il’s “behest of October 8<sup>th</sup>.” With the completion of the various political events of April, Kim Jong Eun has taken command of the three key sectors - military, party, and government - and established his position as the sole leader of the country’s power structure. Thus the Kim Jong Eun succession system has effectively been inaugurated.

### **The “Strong and Prosperous Great Nation” Explodes in Mid-Air**

What occurred on April 15<sup>th</sup>? As the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of North Korean progenitor Kim Il Sung and the deadline to “open the gates of a strong and prosperous great nation,” this was expected to be the day that Kim Jong Eun’s grand coronation ceremony would take place. Two days earlier, on the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup>, North Korea launched its “Eunha-3” rocket, said to carry the “Kwangmyeongseong-3” satellite, from its rocket launch site in Dongchang-Ri. But this long-range rocket, which was intended to be a resounding cannon salute to the birth of the “strong and prosperous great nation,” ended in an abrupt mid-air explosion. Far from entering space orbit, this rocket, which North Korea had devoted so much time and effort to developing, failed to even leave the immediate area of the Korean peninsula, exploding and splashing into the West Sea after only about two minutes of flight. In an instant, the bold and ambitious cannon salute was reduced to a mere fireworks display, and likewise the “strong and prosperous great nation” also exploded in mid-flight. As a result of this pitiful failure the festive atmosphere lost its vitality and turned mournful, and the mood of the public was despondent.

Already on August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1998, in anticipation of Kim Il Sung’s centenary, the regime declared that 2012 would be the “inaugural year of the strong and prosperous great nation.” Since then the “strong and prosperous great nation” concept has been set as the highest national objective, and under this banner the regime was able to demand a spirit of sacrifice and patience from the military and the entire population. This slogan has been emphasized in three aspects: political ideology, the military, and the economy. The regime claims that it has already achieved a strong country in terms of political ideology, is making gradual progress in constructing an economically strong country, and has emerged as a “strong socialist state” through its military power - although it has somewhat mitigated its language to the level of a “strong and prosperous country” (leaving out the

“great” part). The regime calculated that if it could establish its possession of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, it would then be able to declare the achievement of a militarily strong nation.

However, in his speech it seems that Kim Jong Eun somewhat acknowledged the failure of the long-range rocket by saying “We trust not in military equipment such as arms or rockets but in our beloved soldiers.” He further declared, “Our single-hearted unity and invincible military power, added to an industrial revolution for the new century, will produce none other than a strong socialist state.”

## 2. North Korea’s 20 Years of Nuke-and-Missile Politics

North Korea’s nuclear weapons paired with the missiles that can carry them over long distances, together have formed a central part of North Korea’s domestic and foreign strategies. North Korea considers its nukes and missiles the ultimate safeguard of regime survival, a strategic card for use against the US, and an ensemble of *juche* ideology and military-first politics. North Korea had hoped to make progress on two fronts in its negotiations with the US with the combined power of its nuclear and missile cards. One strategic objective is to improve relations with the US and sign a peace treaty to ensure the regime’s survival; the other is to gain large-scale aid shipments. Thus nuclear weapons and missiles are two ultimate tools for regime survival which the North will not abandon for any price, although it may offer some concessions in exchange for large-scale economic rewards in its negotiations with the US after each new provocation. Over the last 20 years North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles have emerged as a core threat to Northeast Asian peace and security and this issue has proven to be difficult to resolve.

### Taepodong-1 (Kwangmyeongseong-1): Signalling the Dawn of the Kim Jong Il Era

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1998, the North launched its Taepodong-1 rocket. The completely unexpected launch of a long-range rocket by North Korea, which at the time was in a state of mass starvation, was a tremendous shock to the international community and signified the regime’s continued survival. The country had seen mass starvation and droves of defections due to repeated natural disasters in the years after Kim Il Sung’s death, its future seemed uncertain, and Kim Jong Il’s moves seemed completely inscrutable. But with the launch of a single Taepodong missile Kim Jong Il emerged boldly at the center of the world’s attention. The Taepodong missile launch, along with Kim Jong Il’s appointment as chairman of the NDC, formally marked the end of the “Arduous March” period and announced

the beginning of the Kim Jong Il era to the domestic audience and the world.

The US was surprised by North Korea's long-range missile launch and immediately entered into negotiations with the North. There had been two previous rounds of US-DPRK missile talks (the first in April 1996 in Berlin, the second in June 1997 in New York). The third round (held in October 1998 in New York) was prompted after Taepodong-1 shot across the Japanese archipelago. At the third round the US demanded a moratorium on test launches, export, development, production and distribution of missiles. In exchange for stopping exports the North asked that the US provide \$3 billion over a three year period. Around that time (in March 1999) North Korea also extracted a promise of 600,000 tons of food aid in exchange for allowing inspections of a facility at Keunchang-Ri which the US suspected was a secret underground nuclear facility. Subsequently a fourth round of missile talks was held (in March 1999 in Pyongyang) and US Special Envoy on North Korea William Perry visited the North (in May 1999). Then in September of that year, as recommended by the "Perry Report," the US eased its economic sanctions against the North, and the North Korean Foreign Ministry announced a moratorium on missile test launches. Amid the moratorium, in July 2000 a fifth round of missile talks was held in Kuala Lumpur. Finally, during the visit by NDC 1<sup>st</sup> Vice Chairman Cho Myeong Rok to the US, the two countries issued a "US-DPRK Joint Communiqué" (Washington DC, October 12<sup>th</sup> 2000) which temporarily settled the missile issue.

The Joint Communiqué declared that the fundamental improvement of DPRK-US relations and the peace and stability of the Asia Pacific region were dependent upon "resolving the missile issue." As part of the agreement on transitioning from the Armistice Agreement to a permanent peace regime and promoting economic exchanges and cooperation, North Korea announced that it would not launch any long-range missiles while talks with the US on the missile issue continued. North Korea used its missile card to achieve the historic "US-DPRK Joint Communiqué" and a visit to Pyongyang by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and in this way Kim Jong Il successfully debuted on the world stage as the leader of the "hermit kingdom."

However the DPRK-US missile negotiations saw no progress under the hard-line policy of the George W. Bush administration, which rejected the foreign policy of the preceding Clinton administration. In October 2002, the Geneva Basic Agreement shattered with North Korea's admission that it had operated a secret nuclear program using Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). With the outbreak of the

second North Korean nuclear crisis, US–DPRK tensions shifted from the missile issue to the nuclear issue.

### **North Korea's Breakthrough Strategy for 2006: Missile Launch in July, Nuclear Test in October**

On July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006 (or the 4<sup>th</sup> in the US) North Korea conducted a series of missile launches which coincided with the US' Independence Day holiday. From 3:32 AM to 5:22 AM it launched a total of 7 missiles ranging from Scud to Rodong to Daepodong 2. Despite the "9.19 Joint Statement" which had been drafted at the Six Party Talks in 2005, the North was under increasing pressure from financial sanctions and talk about the human rights issue. Under those circumstances the US continually refused to hold the bilateral talks that North Korea wanted. Despite the strong message for dialogue that the North sent with its missile launch preparations, President Bush and Secretary of State Rice, viewing the North's actions as "show business," maintained a consistent tough stance through the international media. North Korea responded by using the shock of the missile launch to capture the world's attention in a "breakout strategy" to escape US financial sanctions.

Just 10 days after the missile launch North Korea encountered an unexpected blowback. Through its unjustifiable launch the North brought upon itself increased international isolation and sanctions with the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1695 (2006.7.15). In addition the US and Japan invoked additional sanctions and increased pressure on the North through the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). North Korea thus achieved some tactical success in garnering the world's attention, but they ended up committing a strategic error by fanning widespread international antipathy against themselves.

North Korea attempted to achieve a dramatic reversal of the pressure and sanctions against it. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006, it conducted its first underground nuclear test (at Poonggye–Ri), once again dealing a tremendous shock to the international community. North Korea's Foreign Ministry declared that it had conducted a "nuclear test in self–defense against US pressure and sanctions." The UN Security Council promptly passed Resolution 1718 (110.14) with unanimous approval. The US confirmed that an underground nuclear test had occurred with an estimated explosive force of 1 kt.

### North Korea's Forestalling Strategy: Kwangmyeongseong 2 Launch (2009.4.5), Second Nuclear Test (May 2009)

Already at the start of 2009 North Korea declared its stance on the nuclear issue in anticipation of opening a bilateral dialogue with the US after the new Obama administration took office. Through a Foreign Ministry spokesman's commentary (1.13), they clarified that "the background principle by which we agreed to the 9.19 Joint Statement was not to 'improve relations through denuclearization' but rather 'to achieve denuclearization through normalization of relations.'" The purpose of this declaration was to forestall any moves by President Obama, who had run for election on a platform of promoting "a world without nuclear weapons" and emphasizing "direct talks" with North Korea and Iran, in contrast to the preceding Bush administration. In fact, during the campaign Obama had spoken of "sustained, direct diplomacy," and North Korea must have pinned high hopes on this remark.

North Korea did not wait for the Obama administration. On April 5th as President Obama was speaking in Prague of his vision for "a world without nuclear weapons," North Korea was launching its Kwangmyeongseong-2 rocket. The launch of this rocket before Obama even had time to even assemble his North Korea strategy team forced the new administration to prioritize dealing with North Korea, and it looked as if the US would respond with direct talks. In other words the rocket launch was North Korea's way of inviting the US to the negotiating table. But in the end North Korea gained nothing from it. On the contrary it drew condemnation from the UN Security Council in the form of a Presidential Statement. Meanwhile, angry and feeling betrayed, the Obama administration, instead of pursuing dialogue, grew even more mistrustful of the North.

North Korea then drew out a secret card it had been hoarding. On May 25th, it finally conducted a second nuclear test, dramatically raising tensions on the peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia. This second nuclear test was a strategic move to gain international recognition of North Korea's status as a "de facto" nuclear power. In response the US expressed its position that "We can never acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear power." As the UN Security Council once again expressed its "strongest condemnation" of the North Korean nuclear test, it approved Resolution 1874 (2009.6.12), the most comprehensive set of sanctions against the North yet.

### **NK's Failed Consolidation Strategy: Kwangmyeongseong 3 as a Cannon Salute to the Dawn of the Kim Jong Eun Era**

The launch of the Kwangmyeongseong 3 long-range missile on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012 was a pathetic failure. What is worse, amid the festive atmosphere that had been built up for Kim Il Sung's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party, the North had invited distinguished global news organizations like CNN, BBS, and NHK into the country hoping to show off a fantastic missile salute, but the show came to an anticlimactic end. Space rocket launches do fail from time to time in any country, as South Korea saw with the failure of its own Naro rocket. But in North Korea's case it does not have the luxury of failure. The Kwangmyeongseong 3 rocket absolutely had to succeed. As the foundation of its military-first policy line North Korea pursued greater strength of arms and economic restoration. The long-range missile launch was to be the finale of the country's great celebration festival, a "consolidation strategy" to shore up internal solidarity and solidify the North's status as a militarily strong nation. This "consolidation strategy" has thus encountered a heavy setback. With their most recent spectacular failure, the "missile politics" which the North has operated since 1998 may be headed for catastrophe.

The missile's failure goes beyond the scope of mere "technical problems." It represents the failure of the North Korean system itself. In other words, the failure of the life-or-death strategy upon which the regime staked its future is a revealing sign of either a structural malfunction or serious internal fractures within the regime. This suggests that the regime can no longer function properly under a system characterized by the use of using and fear to achieve policy objectives along with the exaggerated reports and evasion of responsibility that have become common practice. Actually the North Korean system had already ceased to function normally, but dramatic incidents like this latest failure vividly expose the system's limitations.

The Kwangmyeongseong-3 missile launch was planned as way of heralding the dawn of the new Kim Jong Eun era, much as Kwangmyeongseong-1 signaled the Kim Jong Il era's beginning. The missile's failure is a serious setback which damages the image of the newly-inaugurated Kim Jong Eun regime in the eyes of the domestic audience and the world. North Korea went "all-in" with this long-range missile launch, devoting every effort to its success as the cornerstone of its strategies for dealing with the US and consolidating internal solidarity. Since the launch failed it faces heavy repercussions in both its domestic and foreign policies. First off, externally the North's strategic position has dramatically declined and it will inevitably lose much of its power to negotiate with the US.

Internally its problems are even more severe. It is a moment that may spawn skepticism and instinctual suspicion toward young leader Kim Jong Eun, around whom the ruling elites constructed a power structure in concentric circles since they had no alternative. As a result the country may become progressively more difficult to rule as the system enters a new phase of relaxed controls.

The long-range missile launch policy is something that was decided long ago. What is interesting is the “Leap Day Agreement” that was achieved in the midst of this planning. North Korea declared its plan for a missile launch on March 16<sup>th</sup>, drawing criticism for basically scrapping the agreement shortly after its inception. According to the terms of the Leap Day Agreement, the North agreed that in return for 240,000 tons of “nutritional food assistance” from the US it would “institute a moratorium on nuclear tests and long-range missile launches, temporarily stop uranium enrichment activities at Yongbyon, and permit IAEA inspections.” The North claimed that it was launching not a missile but a “working satellite” and that such a launch was not forbidden by the Leap Day Agreement. But even if it truly was a satellite, North Korea clearly violated the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1874, which “demands that the DPRK not conduct any further nuclear test or any launch using ballistic missile technology.” The UN Security Council also promptly adopted a resolute Chairman’s Statement (4.16).

### **Rule by Kim Jong Il’s Dying Injunctions; Failure not in the Manual**

Through this rocket launch we can glimpse North Korea’s elaborate strategic calculations. Right now the US is in a very difficult position and it cannot easily dismiss a challenge from North Korea. For the past decade it has been engaged in a quagmire in the Middle East and has had to lay out tremendous defense expenditures. Its national debt and budget deficit have already exceeded its GDP, making defense budget reductions unavoidable. Early this year the Pentagon released a document entitled “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense” (2012.1.5), in which it implied plans to reduce the scale of its military and also abandon its strategy for “victory on two fronts.” If major security threats break out in the Middle East and Northeast Asia at the same time, the US may find itself in a very difficult strategic situation. North Korea may have assessed that if the Obama administration truly wants stability in the Northeast Asian region it may have to concede that nothing can be done about the North’s nuclear and missile policies.

They also may have thought that since President Obama is concentrating on his re-election campaign, he would passively accept North Korea’s claim about



launching a “working satellite” in order to continue to promote the Leap Day Agreement as a diplomatic achievement in terms of national security and to make progress on resolving the nuclear issue. Perhaps its decision to invite the international media was intended as a way to justify its claim of launching a “working satellite.” However, on the contrary, this launch only intensified the criticism in the US of Obama’s hasty negotiating stance. During his recent visit to Seoul for the Nuclear Security Summit, President Obama delivered a speech at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (3.26) in which he issued a warning directed at the North, saying “[Y]our provocations and pursuit of nuclear weapons have not achieved the security you seek.” He added, “There will be no more rewards for provocations. Those days are over.” But North Korea calculated that even if the US cancelled the 240,000 tons of food assistance, by conducting a long-range missile launch and nuclear test it could obtain 10- or 100-times as much later on.

North Korea appears to have planned to conduct a 3rd nuclear test after launching a long-range rocket approaching the level of an ICBM. If it could confirm that it has ICBM capability, which is a key step to becoming a functional nuclear power, then the US would have no choice but to come to the negotiating table. In that event, with one missile launch Kim Jong Eun would not only get a chance to show off his dignified stature and firm up internal solidarity, he could also recreate Kim Jong Il’s bold debut as a leader. They figured that if they can just withstand a short period of increased pressure and sanctions, the US will start feeling the pressure from the North’s HEU threat and will soon step forward for dialogue and negotiation. Further, taking advantage of the golden opportunity presented by the government transitions in various Northeast Asian countries, the North has adopted an uncooperative “My Way” posture. North Korea’s nuclear and missile development appears to be a core strategic principle that it will continue to stick to regardless of the changes in its internal and external circumstances.

### 3. Whither the Kim Jong Eun Regime?

All of North Korea’s political activities in April can be understood to reflect the domestic and foreign policies established by Chairman Kim Jong Il before his death. All the work done to build the construction system and settle personnel issues from the time of Kim Jong Il’s death until now can be seen as the products of “rule by the dying injunctions” of Kim Jong Il. Their strategy has faithfully followed these dying injunctions, which dictate that North Korea must use its missile and nuclear cards to set up the external conditions necessary to ensure regime survival, undo international sanctions, and develop the economy. But those injunctions only went this far. The regime tried to follow the manual for domestic

and foreign policy left by Kim Jong Il, but unfortunately that manual included no instructions on what to do if the missile failed. If it had succeeded, naturally the next step would be a nuclear test. But the failure created an unforeseen problem, and thus the regime faces a dilemma about what to do next.

### **Another Missile Launch, or a Third Nuclear Test?**

Previously North Korea has shown a pattern of “long-range missile launch followed by nuclear test.” Will they follow the same pattern despite this latest failure? At this juncture it is very difficult to issue a decision on the matter. First of all the US has assessed that North Korea has made very little technical progress in solving the problems with its missiles, as demonstrated by this most recent launch. From the US perspective, they have gained some breathing room. The limitations to the North’s technical progress stem from its difficulty in obtaining the missile parts and equipment. They used to acquire these by way of illegal imports, mainly from Japan, but they have been unable to do so for some time due to the ongoing sanctions. Nevertheless North Korea could attempt an additional launch, but as always this would have no guarantee of success. Another dilemma is the question of whether to conduct another nuclear test. The test might only use up fissile material without producing sufficient strategic gains. It would be difficult for the North to extract strategic concessions from the US without first demonstrating possession of long-range rockets capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

However the possibility of nuclear proliferation via the export of nuclear materials is inevitably a cause for deep concern. With the collapse of the Leap Day Agreement, North Korea is of course freed from its promise to temporarily halt nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment at Yongbyon. Thus it is increasingly likely to go full-steam ahead with uranium enrichment, presenting a touch challenge to the US’ nuclear nonproliferation principle.

On the other hand, since the failure of the missile launch struck a heavy blow to the “status and prestige of the Republic,” the North may feel a greater need to raise tensions by conducting another provocation against the South. As North Korea’s leaders continue to misjudge the situation they may lose self-control and take a reckless action. It goes without saying that we must take prompt and decisive action to counter any North Korean provocation. But South Korea and the US must exercise caution and moderation in their words and actions, so that the North does not feel an excessive sense of crisis and monitors its own behavior in order to produce a stable environment in the region.

## Two Potential Paths for the Kim Jong Eun Regime

The unforeseen failure of this most recent rocket frustrated North Korea's plans to advance to "strong and prosperous nation" status. At this point the newly inaugurated Kim Jong Eun regime must choose between two possible paths. One option is to continue with "missile/nuclear politics" based on the "military-first policy line." If they overlook their window of opportunity amid international pressure and sanctions, this road is bound to lead to catastrophe. But there is another way. If the new successor regime chooses to adopt the political line of "creating a decisive turning point for the sake of raising the people's standard of living and building an economically strong country," they may have some promise of a future. North Korea stands at a crossroads where it must choose whether to invite disaster through the use of its nuclear and missile cards, or achieve a turning point with a new government for a new era. The path that First Chairman Kim Jong Eun must choose is clear. The policy set by the "eternal NDC Chairman" before his death outlined a program that only extended to the political events of April 2012. From now on Kim Jong Eun, as first secretary of the KWP and first chairman of the NDC, must decide on his own course.

NDC First Chairman Kim Jong Eun cannot afford to simply rely on the "aura" of President Kim Il Sung. He must fulfill the dream of providing "white rice and meat soup" for all of his people, a problem that the "eternal president" of the Republic was never able to solve. The solution is to take the road that leads "forward to the final victory"!