

## Prospects for Change in North Korea

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**T**he recent standoff between the United States and North Korea, known officially as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), over their suspected nuclear weapons development program demonstrates anew a disturbing fact of international life—that in this increasingly interdependent world a state's capacity to threaten either regional or global peace is not necessarily dependent on its size, wealth, or overall power. The standoff has also underscored the need to understand the motives, "mindsets," and perceptions of the DPRK's policy-making elite.

A key question that intrigues the observers of that enigmatic regime is: Will it change? And if so, in what direction and at what pace? To explore that question further, we need to dwell briefly on the meaning of change. What does "change" mean in relation to North Korea? Two broad categories of change need to be recognized at once: policy change and systemic change. First, change in North Korean policy can occur while the political system remains intact. Second, it is theoretically possible for the political system itself to undergo change.

Policy change and systemic change, it should be stressed, are not totally unrelated. The former can lead to the latter, while the latter will necessarily produce the former. Policy change can take two polar forms: incremental and sweeping. It is sweeping policy change that can pave the way for eventual systemic

change. In contemplating systemic change, we need to consider both its method and direction. As far as the method of systemic change is concerned, it can take either peaceful or violent form. Violent systemic change, in turn, could occur either through a coup d'état or a revolution.

As for the direction of systemic change, two possibilities can be envisaged. First, the current North Korean political system, which can be characterized as a hybrid of Leninism and monarchy, can be more open, on the model of, say, the former Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. This would mean that while North Korea would remain socialist, it would nonetheless tolerate a greater degree of freedom and pluralistic competition than is the case today.

Alternatively, North Korea may opt for a non-socialist political system on the model of Russia and Eastern Europe today. This would mean the end of monopolistic control by the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the emergence of multiple political parties allowed to compete in the political arena without undue restraint, the adoption of capitalist economic institutions and practices, and an effective guarantee of the freedom of the press and of expression.

In the remainder of this article, we shall first examine the independent variables that are likely to affect whether North Korea can or will change and then speculate about possible scenarios, ranging from the status quo to a collapse of the regime. Finally, we shall ponder the implications of the scenarios for the policies of South Korea, the United States and Japan, the three countries who share strategic interests in the future of North Korea.

### **Variables in the Equation**

The independent variables likely to exert the greatest influence on possible change in North Korea, either in the realm of policy or in system, can be divided into two broad categories: internal

and external. Internally, political leadership and economic performance will hold the key to the question. Externally, the policies and actions of North Korea's principal rival, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the four powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula—the United States, Japan, China, and Russia—will be pivotal.

Perhaps the single most important independent variable is political leadership, that is, the top policy-makers in North Korea.

From its inception in 1948, of course, until July 1994 the DPRK had known only one supreme ruler—Kim Il Sung, who until his recent death concurrently held the posts of General Secretary of the WPK and President of the DPRK. Even though until the last moment Kim Il Sung probably did have the final say on key policy issues, Kim Jong Il appeared already to have taken over the running of the country. To have characterized their respective roles as “reigning” and “ruling,” however, was not entirely accurate. They shared power, with the son's portion having grown steadily. The unique political succession in the North—that is, unique for a putatively socialist state—is closely linked to the question at hand: will North Korea change and, if so, how?

One way in which political succession is likely to impinge on the question may be this: Given its unusual nature, the hereditary succession necessitates legitimization, which in turn requires not only political indoctrination but also performance on the part of the successor-designate. He must demonstrate his fitness to inherit the mantle of the “Great Leader” by producing tangible results that benefit the people whom he would lead. Tangible results, of which the most important is the improvement in the standard of living, in turn require change in economic policy; openness and reform may become all but indispensable.

Implicit in the preceding reasoning is the Rational Actor Model, which may not be applicable to North Korea, particularly to Kim Jong Il. If the views he has articulated reflect his true

convictions and, more important, if they can be postulated to affect North Korean policy, then the probability of openness and reform in the North must be rated rather low. In none of the speeches he has made since the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe has Kim Jong Il embraced the policies of reform and restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

On the contrary he has identified "revisionist policies" as the precipitating factor in the demise of socialism. Instead of strengthening the role of the party and the state, in his view, the Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union "adopted the capitalist relations of ownership and capitalist methods of economic management." Additionally, he has argued, these countries "compromised with imperialism in an unprincipled manner, instead of fighting against it." Finally, the "introduction of 'pluralism' on the pretext of 'reforming' and 'restructuring' hastened the degeneration of socialism" in these countries.<sup>2</sup>

Kim Jong Il has further asserted that the "collusion between the imperialists and counter-revolutionary forces," the "penetration of imperialist ideology and culture," and "opportunism of the right" (*ugyong kihoejuui*) helped to bring down socialism "in many countries." He has dismissed as unfounded the criticism that socialism fosters "totalitarianism," a "garrison state,"

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1 The three most important of Kim Jong Il's speeches are: Kim Jong Il, *Inmin daejung chungsim ui urisik sahoe chuui nun p'ilsung pulp'ae ida* [Our Socialism Centered on the Masses is Ever-victorious and Invincible] (Pyongyang: Choson Nodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 1991), idem, *Sahoe chuui konsol ui yoksajok kyohun kwa uri dang ui ch'ong noson* [The Historical Lesson of Socialist Construction and the General Line of Our Party] (Pyongyang: Choson Nodongdang Ch'ulp'ansa, 1992), and idem, "Sahoe chuui e taehan hwebang un hoyong doelsu opda" [Obstructive Maneuvers Against Socialism Must Not Be Allowed], *Nodong Sinmun*, 4 March 1993, pp. 1-2. Kim Jong Il is said to have made the first speech to the leading cadres of the WPK Central Committee on 5 May 1991 and the second to the same group on 3 January 1991. They are also available in *Nodong Sinmun*, 27 May 1991 and 4 February 1992 as well as in the *Pyongyang Times*, 1 June 1991 and 8 February 1992. The last-mentioned item is said to be a "talk" (*tamhwa*) by Kim Jong Il. It was published originally in the 1 March 1993 issue of *Kulloja* [The Worker], the monthly WPK journal of theory.

2 *Pyongyang Times*, 4 February 1992; *Nodong Sinmun*, 4 February 1992.

or rule by "administrative directives (or commands)." He has underscored the pivotal role of "ideological remolding" (*sasang kaejo saop*). Significantly, he has also stressed the need to underpin indoctrination with "practice," meaning generating good results in socialist construction. "Only when the people experience first-hand the superiority of socialism will they accept it as a matter of life and death," he has said.<sup>3</sup>

As we shall note below, Kim Jong Il's pronounced antipathy to reform has not prevented North Korea from adapting its policy to the changing environment from time to time. What is more, the views he has articulated reflect a fundamental dilemma in which the current North Korean leadership finds itself: although the survival of the regime may dictate reform and restructuring, such a thing may seriously erode the regime's capacity to keep the populace under control and thus cause its eventual demise.

Economic performance, in other words, is a crucial variable in the equation. As adumbrated above, it is clearly intertwined with political leadership. For the choices that leadership makes will largely determine whether the North Korean economy can be rejuvenated. That the economy is in serious trouble is indisputable. For the first time ever, the regime has admitted that its long-term economic plan—the Third Seven-Year Plan (1987–1993)—had failed to fulfill its goals. Instead of launching a new economic plan, Pyongyang has designated the next three years (1994–1996) as a period of adjustment, during which top priority will be placed on agriculture, light industry, and trade.<sup>4</sup>

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3 *Nodong Sinmun*, 4 March 1993.

4 For DPRK Premier Kang Song San's report on the Third Seven-Year Plan to the Twenty-first plenum of the Sixth Central Committee of the WPK, see *Nodong Sinmun*, 9 December 1993. For the text of the decision on the adjustment period adopted by the seventh session of the Ninth Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK, see *ibid.*, 7 April 1994. A Japanese version of the latter may be found in *Gekkan Chosen Shiryo* [Monthly Materials on Korea], June 1994, pp. 10–15. The latter is published in Tokyo by *Chosen Mondai Kenkyujo*, a research institute affiliated with Chosen Soren (Ch'ongryon), the federation of Korean residents

The emphasis on agriculture and light industry reflects the North Korean leadership's recognition that a serious shortage of food and consumer goods poses a major challenge to its survival. Economic activities are impeded by its inability to generate enough hard currency with which to import essential goods, particularly crude oil, so Pyongyang is determined to increase exports. In 1993 North Korea imported an estimated 1.4 million metric tons of crude oil, which represented less than 40 percent of its refining capacity.<sup>5</sup>

Whether Pyongyang can turn the situation around in agriculture, light industry, and trade—and whether it can revitalize its sagging economy—will hinge to a large extent upon the policies and actions of Seoul, Washington, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow. What needs stressing, however, is that it is Pyongyang's own policies that can and will help shape the latter.

Since the framework for inter-Korean cooperation is already in place, for example, it is largely up to North Korea to turn the framework into a palpable reality. If the inter-Korean summit meeting should occur even without Kim Il Sung, and if it should turn out to be not a one-time affair but a repetitive process, then the ROK-DPRK relations could enter a new stage. Implementation of the two inter-Korean agreements, particularly the "basic agreement" that sets forth the principles and procedures relating to cooperation and exchanges between the two sides, however, has the potential to undercut the DPRK's legitimacy and thus its

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in Japan loyal to the DPRK.

- 5 Dong-bok Lee, "North Korea: Trends and Prospects," a paper presented to the conference on Northeast Asia and Russia sponsored jointly by the Gaston Sigur Center for East Asian Studies and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies of the George Washington University, Washington, DC, 17–18 March 1994, p. 6. The Japanese daily, *Mainichi Shinbun*, estimated the amount of crude oil North Korea imported in 1993 at 1.5 million tons, noting that that is no more than what single prefectures in Japan such as Yamanashi and Fukui consume in a year. South Korea, it noted, imported 75 million tons and Japan 200 million tons of crude oil in the same year. *Sande Mainichi* [Sunday Mainichi], 19 June 1994, p. 32.

chances of survival either in the medium or in the long term, while generating short-term economic benefits.

The United States is another external player that can have a major impact on the direction and magnitude of change in North Korea. The persistence with which Pyongyang has pursued direct high-level talks with Washington is emblematic of its keen appreciation of the paramount importance of the United States. If the third round of the US-DPRK high-level talks should resume in Geneva, as appears likely, then North Korea will have a new opportunity to pursue its goals. What it wants most from the United States are diplomatic normalization, a credible guarantee of the non-use of force, and economic assistance, including assistance in replacing its graphite-moderated reactors with light-water reactors.

Since the quid pro quo the United States demands from North Korea will include the transparency of its nuclear program, North Korea will need to make a choice. I for one lean toward the view that North Korea will give up its nuclear card for the right price. The view that the current North Korean leadership sees nuclear weapons as a prerequisite for its survival and hence will never jettison its nuclear weapons program may turn out to be wrong. The short- and medium-term benefits diplomatic recognition from the US will bring to North Korea are too great to be brushed aside.

One of the key benefits will be diplomatic normalization between the DPRK and Japan. That development, which is almost certain to follow the US-DPRK normalization if it does not occur sooner, will entail infusion of substantial sums of Japanese money into the North Korean economy. Whether Japanese funds will enter North Korea under the rubric of compensation, reparations or economic cooperation will be immaterial. What will matter most is that North Korea will get much-needed funding to which it feels it is entitled, although a large proportion of it could well come in the form of industrial machinery, technology, and commercial credits. These things,

moreover, will most likely be available to North Korea over a period of five to ten years rather than immediately.

Like economic exchanges and cooperation with South Korea, however, Japanese capital and technology will be a mixed blessing for the North; and the same can be said of economic assistance with the US. They will inevitably open the door to "ideological pollution," the influx of ideas and practices that will help erode the regime's grip on its populace.

That prospect has apparently prompted the North Korean leadership to take a close look at the Chinese model. Kim Il Sung reportedly told a visiting Chinese delegation in September 1993 that he admired China "for having achieved brilliant reforms and openness," while continuing simultaneously to build "socialism with Chinese characteristics." He added that the Chinese experience would become "an encouraging factor for us, Koreans."<sup>6</sup>

Not only will the Chinese model serve as an inspiration for North Korea, but China will also exert influence on Pyongyang in economic and external policies alike. China is North Korea's only ally in any effective sense, as well as number-one trading partner. In the international arena China is probably North Korea's most powerful patron. On the nuclear issue, for example, China has been instrumental in persuading the US and South Korea not to press for UN Security Council resolutions but to settle for a "statement" by the Council president on two separate occasions. The need to forestall a Chinese veto in the Council also played a major part in the decision of the US, South Korea, and Japan to propose relatively mild sanctions against North Korea; the breakthrough occasioned by former US President Jimmy Carter's visit to Pyongyang has placed the push for sanctions in abeyance.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian Federation as its principal successor have transformed

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6 *North Korea News*, No. 702 (27 September 1993), p. 5.



Pyongyang-Moscow relations in a fundamental way. While the treaty of friendship and mutual assistance between them remains in effect on paper, its practical value has declined sharply; its provisions regarding military assistance in the event of war have been invalidated *de facto*. This does not mean, however, that Russia will cease to be a factor in North Korean policy-making. Since Moscow appears to see a continuing stake in Pyongyang and since Pyongyang cannot afford to sever its ties with Russia, the two sides will continue to interact in the economic and security arena. Should the political landscape in Moscow change dramatically, moreover, that will have a measurable impact on Moscow-Pyongyang relations.

### **Scenario One: Incremental Policy Change**

Against the preceding backdrop let us examine three of the many possible scenarios: (1) incremental policy change, (2) major policy change, and (3) systemic change. In the short run the first seems to be the most plausible. It amounts in effect to the continuation of recent trends; hence it can be equated with the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of internal politics, the consolidation of political succession will remain the regime's foremost goal. This means the continuation of institutionalization and legitimization, and the centerpiece of institutionalization is strengthening Kim Jong Il's grip on the military, a process that has been under way since May 1990 when he was elected the First Deputy Chairman of the DPRK National Defense Committee by the First Session of the Ninth Supreme People's Assembly. In December 1991 he was named the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army

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7 Rinn-Sup Shinn, a leading North-Korea watcher in the US, posits four scenarios: "status quo, reform, hardline, and collapse." See his report, "North Korea: Policy Determinants, Alternative Outcomes, U.S. Policy Approaches," *CRS Report for Congress*, 24 June 1993 (Washington: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 1993), pp. 14-18.

(KPA) by the Nineteenth Plenum of the Sixth Central Committee of the WPK. In April 1992 he was "elevated" (*ch'udae*) to the rank of the Marshal of the Republic (*Konghwaguk wonsu*) by a joint decision of the WPK Central Committee, the WPK Central Military Affairs Committee, the DPRK National Defense Committee, and the DPRK Central People's Committee. Finally, in April 1993 he was elected the Chairman of the DPRK National Defense Committee at the Fifth Session of the Ninth Supreme People's Assembly.<sup>8</sup>

From these successive measures Kim Jong Il is formally in control of the North Korean armed forces. Given his lack of actual military experience, however, that may not necessarily translate into effective control. Hence efforts to fortify the link between Kim Jong Il and the armed forces will continue. His visits to KPA units, meetings with company commanders and company political commissars and the like exemplify such efforts.

Legitimization of the succession scheme will feature an escalation of Kim Jong Il's personality cult. An unusual aspect of the Kim Jong Il cult is the extent to which Kim Il Sung participated in its propagation. In April 1992 he took the unusual step of writing a poem in both classical Chinese and Korean in commemoration of his son's fiftieth birthday. In the poem the elder Kim referred to the "birth of the bright star," Kim Jong Il's "possession of both literary and physical talents and of the virtues of loyalty and filial piety" and the universal esteem in which Kim Jong Il is held (*manin i ch'ingsong*).<sup>9</sup>

Starting in the latter part of 1993 *Nodong Sinmun* began with increasing frequency to print quotations from Kim Il Sung that

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8 *Nodong Sinmun*, 25 December 1991, 14 and 21 April 1992; Sakai Takashi, "Kita Chosen 'Ware ware shiki shakai shugi' no seijiteki tokusei" [The Political Characteristics of North Korea's 'Our Own Style Socialism'] an unpublished paper, February 1994, p. 12.

9 *Nodong Sinmun*, 27 April 1992.

would praise or urge loyalty to Kim Jong Il. To give just a few examples: "In our country Comrade Kim Jong Il has been wisely leading all the work of the party, the state, and the armed forces; thus the problem of leadership succession has been brilliantly solved." (5 January 1994) "Comrade Kim Jong Il has an indomitable will and an outstanding mastery of strategies and art of military leadership befitting the supreme commander of revolutionary armed forces. Herein lies the guarantee that our revolutionary armed forces will continuously develop and become stronger and that they will be ever-victorious." (24 January 1994) "Today our people call Comrade Kim Jong Il's politics the politics of love, the politics of faith, and the politics of comprehensive scope (*kwangp'ok chongch'i*), and this is an expression of trust in and admiration for [the leader] who trusts the people and wages a struggle on their behalf with everything he has at his disposal." (1 February 1994)

In his interview with the *Washington Times* in April 1994, Kim Il Sung described his son and heir apparent as being "talented in political and military affairs" and "very dedicated to me and very obedient." Kim Il Sung also revealed that he depended heavily on Kim Jong Il for information: "Because I have some eye problems, he has arranged for all reports to be recorded to save me from having to spend hours reading them. I am very proud to have such a good son. He is so concerned about my health. If I don't go to the countryside, he gives instructions for me to do so through my secretary."<sup>10</sup>

As previously noted, however, words alone will not suffice in bolstering the succession scheme. Everything will hinge, to a large extent, on the state of the economy. That is why the North Korean leadership will make a herculean effort to turn the economic situation around. The policies adopted in December 1993—"agriculture first, light industry first, and trade first"—will continue to guide North Korea in 1994 and beyond.

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10 *Washington Times*, 19 April 1994.

No matter how vigorously Pyongyang pursues these goals, however, it will have but limited success as long as it clings to the old ways of doing things. The Najin-Sonbong free economic zone, to which North Korea hopes to attract foreign investors, may remain little more than a paper scheme. The meager results of the joint venture law Pyongyang enacted in 1984, which attracted primarily small-scale investments by Korean residents in Japan who are loyal to the DPRK, are attributable, among other factors, to poor infrastructure, particularly roads, ports, and railroads; an unstable supply of such key energy sources as oil and electricity; the dismally low international rating of North Korea's investment climate; and bureaucratic and political constraints.<sup>11</sup>

The Najin-Sonbong free economic zone does represent a new approach. Since promulgating the decision to install it in December 1991, the DPRK government has inserted several articles on joint ventures and foreign investment into the revised constitution and enacted a series of laws aimed at making investment in the North more attractive than before. For example, the DPRK now permits one-hundred-percent ownership of enterprises by foreigners, guarantees remittances of earnings by foreigners to their countries, and provides assurances against the nationalization of foreign-owned property.<sup>12</sup>

Kim Il Sung, however, may have been overly optimistic in April 1994 when he indicated that the Najin-Sonbong free economic zone would attract "many foreign investors" and that their investment "will contribute to expanding and developing not only their economic ties with our country, but also their economic and technical exchange and cooperation with different countries the world over, including China and Russia."<sup>13</sup>

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11 Tamaki Motoi and Watanabe Toshio (eds.) *Kita Chosen: hurakuka, sabaibaruka* [North Korea: Collapse or Survival] (Tokyo: Saimaru [Simul] Shuppankai, 1993), pp. 128-29.

12 Ibid., pp. 132-33.

What will really make a difference is a breakthrough in North Korea's external relations, which has a good chance of occurring in 1994. If a summit meeting between Kim Jong Il and President Kim Young Sam should materialize, it has the potential to usher in a new era of cooperation and exchanges in economic and other areas between Seoul and Pyongyang. That would surely inject a new vigor into the North Korean economy. Similar results can follow tangible improvement in DPRK relations with the US and, particularly, with Japan.

### **Scenario Two: Major Policy Change**

North Korea has shown that notwithstanding the rigidity of its political system and the seeming sluggishness of its policymaking process, it is capable of changing its course abruptly. While this has happened almost exclusively in the realm of external policy, no one should rule out the possibility that it can occur in domestic policy as well.

Among notable changes in Pyongyang's external policy in recent years have been its 1990 decision to seek diplomatic normalization with Japan, its reversal of policy on UN membership in 1991, its conclusion of two inter-Korean agreements in the same year, its acceptance of a full-scope safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1992, its announcement in 1993 that it would withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and its proposal for an inter-Korean summit in 1994.

Under what circumstances will change of comparable magnitude occur in Pyongyang's domestic policy? A deterioration of economic conditions or an unanticipated change in the external setting may compel the North Korean leadership to adopt measures aimed at meaningful reform and restructuring. It may, for example, substantially enlarge the scope of private economic

activities and accelerate the implementation of the independent accounting system of state enterprises. The authority to conduct foreign trade that has already been delegated to state enterprises and subnational governments may also be enlarged. An experiment with de facto privatization in agriculture reminiscent of the household responsibility system in China cannot be ruled out.

Major change could occur in the opposite direction as well. The ascendancy of hard-liners in Pyongyang's power structure or the imposition of economic sanctions either by the UN Security Council or outside the UN framework may lead to retrogression in economic policy and a further tightening of political controls. Mobilization in the form of "100-day and 200-day battles" may recur, and ideological indoctrination may intensify.

Realistically, however, the probability of all this actually materializing seems rather low. Any major change in domestic policy is likely to be introduced in stages rather than abruptly.

### **Scenario Three: Systemic Change**

As more information becomes available about North Korea, the view that the North Korean system is too resilient to succumb to either internal or external pressure needs to be reassessed. Collapse of the current regime in Pyongyang, in other words, seems to be within the realm not merely of possibility but of probability as well.

Such a reassessment is compelled by the following considerations. First, the economic situation appears to be far worse than what most observers had estimated and shows no sign of ameliorating. The shortage of food is so serious and widespread that the authorities have even relaxed travel restrictions for people who embark on a search for food. Other essential consumer goods are also scarce. The reason why visitors to North

Korea seldom see queues in front of stores is because there is usually nothing to sell.<sup>14</sup>

Second, support for the regime is markedly more fragile than is generally assumed by outside observers. There are even secret gatherings of dissidents. The regime has thus far managed to prevent the popular discontent from boiling over through coercive controls and intimidation. The knowledge that overt opposition to the regime invites harsh penalties, such as imprisonment in forced labor camps and, even, deaths, not only to those directly involved but also to their family members serves as the principal deterrent to such activity.<sup>15</sup>

Third, notwithstanding the unceasing indoctrination to which they are subjected, a very high proportion of the North Korean people are believed to resent or disparage Kim Jong Il. Instead of being their "dear leader," he may actually be one of the most despised persons in the North. A key reason for such pervasive animosity is that economic conditions have steadily deteriorated under his tutelage. In the words of Lee Young Hwa, the author of the best-selling expose of life in the North, "it is not an

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14 While accounts by defectors from the North need to be taken with a grain of salt, those by visitors from other countries seem more credible. Korean-Chinese who have visited their relatives in the North bring back stories of dire economic conditions; more important, they confirm the veracity of their accounts by taking with them bundles of clothing and food when they cross the PRC-DPRK border along the Yalu and Tumen rivers. A current best-seller in Japan by a Korean resident in Japan who spent eight months in North Korea studying economics gives a fascinating, albeit dismal, account of how the North Korean people actually live or struggle to survive. See Lee Young Hwa (Yi Yong-hwa), *Kita Chosen himitsu shukai no yoru* [North Korea: the Night of a Secret Meeting] (Tokyo: Kabushiki Kaisha Kuresuto-sha, 1994).

15 Ibid., pp. 252–53. A North Korean defector living in China told a Japanese writer in June 1994 that he belonged to an anti-Kim Il Sung organization called the Alliance for the Struggle for Korean Democracy, Freedom, and Unification (*Choson Minju Chayu T'ong'il T'ujaeng Yonmaeng*). Most startling was the defector's claim that the vice president (*pujusok*) of the organization was a general in the North Korean armed forces. "Ochiai Nobuhiko Kita Chosen bomei kaido zannyu hokoku" [Ochiai Nobuhiko's Report on His Infiltration of the Route Used by North Korean Political Asylum Seekers], *Sapio*, 23 June 1994, pp. 9–10.

exaggeration to say that not a single economic policy adopted by Secretary Kim Jong Il has been a success."<sup>16</sup>

Fourth, North Korea's economic malaise may be so grave as to defy patchwork solutions; nothing less than a major surgery will do. That in turn is bound to undercut political controls, generating unrest and even precipitating violent protests.

The preceding considerations, on the other hand, must be arrayed against the awesome coercive power of the regime and its uncommon survival instincts, and the extraordinary patience of the North Korean masses. The coercive apparatus of North Korea is legendary, leaving very little room for organized opposition—particularly of the kind that could destabilize the regime.

Kim Il Sung remained in power for 46 years practicing the art of survival in a masterful fashion. What this implies is that the regime will do whatever necessary to survive. Recent moves that may well achieve breakthroughs in Pyongyang's relations with Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo may bespeak its realization of the severity of its predicament as well as the determination to ease out of it. As noted, however, such an approach carries risks as well. While it may be necessary, even indispensable, to forestall a crash landing for the North Korean economy, it may also pave the way for an eventual disintegration of the idiosyncratic political system he crafted in the North.

Finally, the amazing patience of the North Korean masses will be a major factor in prolonging the life of the regime. Long inured to spartan living conditions, hard labor, and perpetual political regimentation, the North Korean people have a threshold of endurance that is perhaps among the highest in the world;<sup>17</sup> they are exceedingly unlikely to risk their lives and those of their

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16 Lee, *Kita Chosen...*, p. 248.

17 See Andrei Lankov, *Pyongyang no gaman tsuyoi shomindachi* [The Patient Ordinary People of Pyongyang], trans. Yi Pyong-ju (Tokyo: San'ichi shobo, 1992). Lankov is a Russian scholar who lived in Pyongyang in the mid-1980s as a graduate student at Kim Il Sung University.



loved ones in political protest unless they have been driven to a corner.

What will happen now that Kim Il Sung has passed from the scene? In the short run at least, Kim Jong Il will likely remain in control of the regime. Hence systemic change will not occur. Such change, nonetheless, seems unavoidable in the long run, perhaps in the medium run as well. Two most important variables will be the economic situation and the loyalty of the armed forces. If the economy remains either stagnant or deteriorates further, chances of either a popular rebellion or a coup d'état will increase appreciably. So long as the armed forces remain loyal to Kim Jong Il then the probability of his being overthrown will dwindle to a vanishing point.

How the key external players respond to the unfolding crisis in the North will have a huge impact. Hence it is necessary to ponder briefly the policy implications of the preceding analysis for them. To make the task manageable, only three of them will be considered: Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo.

### **Implications for Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo**

All three—South Korea, the US, and Japan—have varying degrees of leverage over North Korea, as do China and Russia. They can take or refrain from taking measures aimed at inducing policy change in the North or accelerating systemic change there. The questions that need to be asked, then, are: is it in the interests of these countries to induce change in North Korean policy? What of systemic change? What policies should they pursue either individually or in concert?

The three countries are allies either in a formal sense or in a de facto sense. Formally, they are bound together by two sets of bilateral treaties: the ROK-US mutual defense treaty and the security treaty between Japan and the US. Since the US is the guarantor of the security of both the South Korea and Japan, the latter two are bound up in a de facto security triangle. Ironically,

North Korea, which vehemently condemns the "triangular military alliance" of Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul, has inadvertently strengthened the bonds among the three. The crisis triggered by North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons program has been instrumental in routinizing triangular policy consultations among the three.

All this is to underscore that the three allies have a striking convergence of interests vis-à-vis North Korea. They all have a stake in containing the North Korean threat, which calls for bringing the DPRK into the international community as a law-abiding member. To the extent that policies of openness, reform, and restructuring on the part of North Korea help attain that goal, they welcome it. And all of them are willing to lend a helping hand through exchanges and cooperation in the economic, cultural, technical, and other fields.

Whether they would welcome systemic change in the North as well, however, is problematic. On that issue, the interests of the three countries may not necessarily coincide. The US and Japan, for example, have less to fear from sudden systemic change, that is to say, the collapse of the current North Korean regime than South Korea. It is worth stressing at this point that systemic change is not the same as extinction. While it will be preceded by the collapse of the current regime, the political vacuum can theoretically be filled by an alternative regime.

There is nonetheless a high probability that the collapse of the current regime will spell the end of a separate political entity in the North; unification by absorption à la Germany will most likely ensue. It is this latter scenario that alarms South Korea. The German experience demonstrates that the costs of absorption are prohibitively high, perhaps too high for South Korea to bear today or in the immediate future. The most desirable scenario from Seoul's perspective would therefore be for Pyongyang to put its economic house in order first and delay the process of unification until a later date when the economic capabilities of both sides have grown markedly.

It is then in the best interests of Seoul to do all it can to help rejuvenate Pyongyang's economy. That means not only making a strenuous effort to improve relations with Pyongyang with a view toward implementing the two inter-Korean agreements that are technically in force today but also encouraging Washington and Tokyo to normalize their respective relations with Pyongyang.

Should North Korea refuse to make its nuclear program transparent, however, neither South Korea nor the US nor Japan can afford to give North Korea what it wants so desperately—recognition, respect, and economic assistance masquerading as “economic cooperation.” As already noted, my hunch is that North Korea will not remain obstinate, let alone recalcitrant, indefinitely. It will ultimately trade its nuclear ambitions for the tangible benefits mentioned above.

Systemic constraints stemming principally from North Korea's apotheosis of *juche sasang* and mind-boggling personality cult centered on the “Great Leader” (widaehan suryong) and the “Dear Leader” (ch'inae hanun chidoja tongji) will continue to make North Korea dogmatic, inflexible, fickle, and less than trustworthy. It will retain the dubious distinction of being the most difficult country with which to negotiate. Notwithstanding all this, diplomacy is infinitely more preferable than sanctions in dealing with the monumental challenge that is North Korea.

One can only hope that the revival of diplomacy in the wake of the Carter visit to the DPRK will prove to be not transient but enduring and productive. For that to happen, however, Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo will have to go at least halfway, perhaps more than halfway, in accommodating the needs of the Pyongyang regime. In the short to medium term, all three have much more to gain than to lose from keeping that regime alive and well.