

The DPRK and Late De-Stalinization

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The death of Kim Il Sung on 8 July 1994 had political significance on three main levels. It was the death of a preeminent political leader; it was a further development in an ongoing international crisis over the DPRK's nuclear weapons program; and it inaugurated a still-unfinished period of transition for the political system of the DPRK. Not surprisingly, the death of an individual leader and the management of a specific international crisis have been the levels that have attracted the most attention, but it is the question of the lasting consequences of Kimist rule for the DPRK that is the subject of this paper. Briefly, my argument is that, tactical feints and closely supervised experiments notwithstanding, little in the way of structural reform in the economy or change to the tenor of the DPRK's relations with its neighbors can be expected in the near future. Change, when it does come, is likely to proceed from efforts within the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) to restore socialist legality as a principle over arbitrary leadership decision-making.

The Current Situation

Efforts to chart the likely future course of the DPRK must of course begin in the present. Here the current reality is that, a year after Kim Il Sung's passing, the country continues to be ruled in a manner highly reminiscent of the Soviet Union in the Stalinist

era, featuring a high level of political mobilization, a highly centralized economic planning model, a monolithic ideology, and a personal dictatorship buttressed by cult of personality. We are not necessarily looking at a static or stagnant system, but the ways in which it has evolved since the 1950s have tended to ensure and enhance both the personal authority of the leader and the central role of the party in all significant spheres of the country's life. This evolution has, of course, led to the hereditary succession which is now being given effect with few, if any, surprises. Kim Jong-il appears to be in charge, supported by a KWP Politburo consisting of a group of men almost all in their seventies and eighties who entered the leadership circle some twenty to thirty years ago, and who are bound together by ties of personal loyalty to Kim Il Sung and to the ethos of ex-Manchurian guerillas.

An unchanged leadership configuration has had its natural outcome in an unchanged set of state policies. In the economic sphere, despite a long-standing thesis that the DPRK has been seeking ways and means of bringing about economic reform based on Chinese experience,¹ in 1995 the DPRK continues to pursue economic development via policies essentially unchanged since the 1960s. And again, as is the case with the political system, while we are not dealing with an entirely static model, the changes that have taken place over the years do not constitute reforms of the existing structure. Rather, they appear to be system-defending measures whose major hallmarks are

- efforts to streamline the administration of foreign trade and promote light industry production for export markets
- experimentation with Special Economic Zone strategies in the northeast region

1 The extensiveness and persistence of this theme may be illustrated by some of the titles of articles reviewing annual developments in North Korea published in *Asian Survey* during the period: "North Korea in 1983: Transforming 'The Hermit Kingdom?'" "North Korea in 1984: 'The Hermit Kingdom' Turns outward," "North Korea in 1985: A New Era After Forty Years," "North Korea in 1989: Touched by Winds of Change?"

- relaxation of controls on border trade in the northeast
- the continuation of low-level, third-party trade with the ROK, but the exclusion of ROK investment
- a continuing reliance on extensive means of economic development
- the preservation of the mainstream economy under existing ideological parameters
- continued reliance on ideological incentives for the work force
- concerted attempts to limit public awareness of economic experimentation and a continuing prohibition on public or semi-public debate on economic reform

In the area of foreign policy, the DPRK response to its geopolitical environment remains heavily influenced by ideology. This ideology cannot accept, or perhaps even envisage, indefinite peaceful coexistence between the DPRK and its neighbors, all of whom are also major regional and/or global powers, and this situation therefore obliges the DPRK to maintain a highly self-sufficient stance in economic and political matters. Accordingly, the DPRK has only been able to achieve the form of national security that its ideology and resultant stress on self-sufficiency allows—namely, national security that gives it very little purchase on events immediately beyond its borders. Moreover, it can only be sustained by rigidly screening off its people from all but the most peripheral of foreign contact, and also by the employment of a highly cost-ineffective coercion-persuasion apparatus within its borders. Efforts to influence international movements such as the Non-Aligned Movement have been conspicuously unsuccessful, its dialogue with Japan has been stalled for the past three years, and its militant stance on reunification has had the effect of ensuring a high level of US resolve to remain committed to an active military presence in Northeast Asia—this throughout an era in which practically all aspects of US foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region have undergone extensive debate while military deployments elsewhere have undergone severe modification. Meanwhile, rela-

tions with the ROK stand at their lowest ebb for many years, with actual dialogue stalled since 1992 and DPRK rhetoric as zestful as ever.

For the DPRK, then, this is a present in which it continues to pursue fundamental economic, political, social and foreign policy objectives such as economic development and prosperity, national security and reunification, but its chosen means have become dysfunctional, to the extent that the reverse of announced objectives seems to be drawing near: economic backwardness, a standard of living not far above subsistence level, ineffective foreign policy stances, international pariah status—and the perpetuation of the division of the peninsula well into the next century.

Under these circumstances, the case for a fundamental change in the policies that have produced this state of affairs is clear enough, but in fact there is every sign that this case is unargued in Pyongyang, and perhaps even unbroached in any meaningful fashion within earshot of the leadership. Whatever private doubts key officials in the DPRK might have about the direction their country is headed in, the concept of structural reform remains a negative one, equated with dissent from the ideological line propounded by Kim Il Sung and now Kim Jong-il. The consequences for reform policies are obvious: such a complex, demanding process cannot begin until the would-be architects are at least able to discuss what it is they are trying to achieve.

The Case for Reform

Debate on the presence or absence of reform measures in DPRK economic policy tends to be obscured by elastic definition of the term. In a system as rigid as the DPRK's, almost any form of departure from strict economic autarky seems to be hailed as a "reform," yet if the term is to have any sort of meaning at all, it needs to be correlated with the reforming practices and experiences of reforming centrally planned economies else-

where. Therefore, having identified the hallmarks of system-defending reforms, at this point we should note some hallmarks of what might constitute substantial structural reform in a DPRK environment. They include

- wide-ranging, transparent economic reform backed up by public awareness and even debate on key economic issues, provided it does not threaten KWP political hegemony in the first instance
- the countermanding of the Three Revolutions Team Movement and other form of ideological hegemony over economic activity in the mainstream economy
- the establishment of market economy activity alongside the state sector
- at least partial decollectivization of agriculture
- foreign debt negotiation, and other sustained, focused attempts to secure foreign investment, though not necessarily from the ROK
- the large-scale substitution of ideological incentives for material incentives in the workforce.

Above and beyond the particular geopolitical circumstances and the ideological outlook of the DPRK, and above and beyond the leadership's interpretation of those circumstances, the imperative of reform in the DPRK arises from a fundamental need to adjust to a changed international economic order which is hostile to the concept of self-reliance, and hence to almost every aspect of the DPRK's state ideology. But if the diagnosis seems clear cut, the course of treatment is not, for there are three main impediments to reform embedded in the current system—the prevailing Kimist ideology, awareness of the consequences of reform for Leninist party rule elsewhere, and the nuclear issue.

We need not dwell upon the impediment posed by Kimist ideology. A deeply entrenched state ideology that is founded in an obsolete concept of the role of the state in the prevailing international economic and political order constitutes the first barrier to structural reform in the DPRK. The major question posed here is the extent to which the Kimist system and its resulting set of policies have been institutionalized: are we

dealing with a fuhreristic-type regime whose organization is centered on the leader, or are we dealing with a more conventional Leninist system whose organization is centered on the party organization? If it is the former, then the dynamic principle for enforcing current ideological parameters may indeed have died with Kim Il Sung, however much the limbs may still be twitching. If it is the latter, then the means of enforcing these parameters have been substantially untouched by Kim's passing and the party machine will continue to function as it has in the past.

In the case of the DPRK we must contend with obvious evidence of the latter: an elaborate system of mass organization and mobilization, conceptualized by an elaborate and detailed metaphorical description of the masses as the limbs of the body politic, the party as the head, and the Great Leader or Dear Leader as the brain. Against this background, there seems little cause to doubt the DPRK's protestations that it has achieved a rock-like unity centered around a monolithic ideology and a genius teacher-leader, now identified as Kim Jong-il. A persuasive and extensive literature maintains that this is a revolution that has been thoroughly institutionalized, and a state which enmeshes practically all its citizens in a tight web of party-led activity. It will not automatically seek out alternatives after the death of its founder.

The second impediment issues from leadership awareness of the structural reform process in other Leninist party states. To the extent that a DPRK leadership contemplating reform might look to the case of the Soviet Union while China for guidance, it would find rather depressing lessons to be learned. The Soviet Union passed through roughly four generations of regime transition, from Lenin to Stalin, to Khrushchev/Brezhnev to Gorbachev, and China is on the verge of a third generation. Both countries have seen the passing of the first generation of the revolution presided over by charismatic founder-leaders to succeeding generations characterized by retreats from the excesses

of this leadership style in favor of institutionalization and the reassertion of party rule over autocracy. The Soviet Union saw that process fail on both a political and institutional level, and few people doubt that if the Chinese Communist Party is to survive it will need to jettison virtually all its remaining Leninist baggage. The DPRK has reached its first major divide some fifteen years after China and some forty years after the Soviet Union and so now confronts (in theory, at least) the problems of late de-Stalinization.

Could not the DPRK learn from the experiences of the Soviet Union and China and chart a less painful course of modernization? This is always theoretically possible, but it would take an extraordinary combination of intellect and statesmanship to embrace painful options and initiate a broad range of policies that would countermand the *juche* revolution, and this is a combination unlikely to be found within the Korean Workers Party today. Rather, pain avoidance, wishful thinking and outright self-deception at long-term cost are likely to be the common coin, for there is only one abiding lesson to be gained from fraternal party experience, and that is that efforts to rapidly transform command economies place the Leninist party in a no-win situation, characterized chiefly by ideological confusion and institutional paralysis.

This perspective suggests that late de-Stalinization may in fact be a strong disadvantage. The party—and hence the country—has had far longer than even the Soviet Union had to ingrain the habits of full-blown Stalinism, and no “learning culture” (to appropriate Amsden’s term) to transform these habits can be said to exist. The experience of Leninist parties in similar circumstances elsewhere has been profoundly painful and offers powerful disincentives to KWP simultaneously contemplating a comprehensive program of economic liberalization and hoping to preserve its prerogatives amidst the fallout. In short, in addition to coping with pressing, ideologically driven systemic crises; the DPRK has to cope with demoralizing evidence from

the experience of others that in any real reforming process its ruling party is doomed.

The third impediment arises from the evident intention of the DPRK to acquire nuclear weapons, for this policy requires that any process of change must be initiated in an atmosphere of crisis. This immediately poses a further set of limitations on the regime, for while it can readily mobilize people against the external threat posed, for example, by economic sanctions, it cannot do this without locking itself into a defense of the cause for which the nuclear weapons program was undertaken. The corollary of this is, of course, that it cannot establish a political environment that would induce foreign participation in any process of structural reform unless it gives satisfaction to its neighbors and to the US on the nuclear issue. The notion of substantial foreign economic investment in a nuclear DPRK is as unlikely as it sounds—and it should be remembered that under the scope of the October 1994 Geneva Accord with the US, the DPRK achieved the key objective of retaining the weapons-grade plutonium that it already possesses.²

There is a further sense in which the DPRK nuclear program is potentially a powerful obstacle to structural reform. While the development of an efficient heavy industry sector fed by advanced technology is essential to the production of conventional weapons, and to this extent is a powerful advocate for structural reform, the nuclear option lessens pressure for structural reform, for it enables a powerful weapon to be developed largely independent of such pressures. As the case of Pakistan, for example, shows, a nuclear weapons program can proceed as a pocket of excellence in an economy that otherwise lacks many of the hallmarks of an advanced sophisticated economy. In fact, the nuclear option does more than enable the DPRK to satisfy key strategic weaponry requirements from within existing ideologi-

2 For analysis of this accord see, for example, Oh and Gruber (1995: 97–116), especially p. 107.

cal parameters—it locks the DPRK into a defense of those parameters, for the international unacceptability of its nuclear policy ensures its continuing pariah status, and this in turn necessitates and vindicates continuing policies of self-reliance.

The nature of the DPRK's ideology and its reinforcement, the experience of Leninist parties elsewhere, and the dynamics of the nuclear issue therefore combine to offer powerful disincentives to structural reform. Despite overwhelming external perception of the need for such reform, the somewhat depressing conclusion is that if structural reform is to emerge, then any form of need perception precipitated by the external environment is an unlikely agent in the first instance. Logically, then, the process will have to begin from within existing ideological parameters.

Change from within Existing Parameters

Change flowing from within existing ideological parameters means change flowing from within existing party and state institutions, and with this observation we come to the arena where the first significant power struggles in the post-Kim Il Sung era would take place—the Politburo presided over by Kim Jong-il. In the aftermath of Kim Il Sung's death media attention tended to concentrate on the more lurid aspects of his son's purported curriculum vitae, but this obscures the true nature of the change that has already occurred. Only on a superficial level has the transfer of power been from one individual to another; on a far more meaningful level it has been the transfer of power from an individual to a system. Whether Kim Jong-il is a terrorist, playboy or closet liberal is therefore of limited relevance, for he is committed to, and must maintain, the essence of his father's ideological system. If he is as lacking in self-discipline as rumor would have it, he may do it badly; if he is in fact a seasoned, skillful operator he may do it well, but do it he will, for the coherency and perceived legitimacy of the regime largely depend on it. And even if necessity did not dictate this

course of action, what is known about the political activities of Kim Jong-il suggests that he would willingly opt for maintaining his father's bequest. Despite speculation that Kim Jong-il might be a potentially liberalizing influence—often based on the somewhat dubious grounds that he belongs to a younger generation—his past record suggests a strong attachment to the principles of Kimist rule.³

As with so many other aspects of DPRK politics, the quality and quantity of information concerning the life of Kim Jong-il inspires divergent assessments of his impact upon state affairs. At the death of his father in 1994, it was striking that after fourteen years near the top of party and government, and perhaps an equal period of time working in the party without being mentioned directly in the media, it was impossible to associate the younger Kim reliably with any major strand of state policy or activity other than prestigious architectural projects, ideological control of the performing arts and of literature, and direction of the Three Revolutions Teams ideological campaign of the 1970s. Whatever the actual subsistence of aspects of Neo-Confucianist tradition in the DPRK, while his father lived the obsequious role and behavior of Kim Jong-il in public fitted Confucian expectations of filial behavior well, while the central theme of Kim Jong-il's entire working life has been consolidation of his father's ideological system. In the economic sphere his name is associated with policies and activities such as uneconomic prestige constructions, Stakhanovite "speed battles," and consolidation of party control over economic activity. In the ideological sphere, the consolidation of a power base within the

3 The issue of generational change is a multi-faceted one. There is evidence from Soviet studies, for example, that generational analysis is a poor predictor of political change due to its weak deductive base. See, for example, Roeder (1993:18). In a DPRK context, Kim Jong-il has never been identified specifically with a particular generation. On the contrary, he has stated in his own doctrinal teachings that "Our party . . . strengthened the ranks of cadres on the principle of combining old, middle-aged and young people, regarding loyalty to the party and the leader as the basic criterion." *Pyongyang Times*, 19 October 1982.

party required him to direct the activities of the Three Revolution Teams which have helped to maintain the rigidity of the system. It has been a working life spent devoted to issues that are essentially irrelevant to reform.

Nor is the Politburo likely to harbor any closet reformers, for while practically nothing is known about the inner workings of the Politburo, it is clear from Kim Il Sung's principles of selection that members' interests and capacities would seem to lie very far from the path of reform, and indeed may not run much past maintaining their position and seeking self preservation. Some changes may occur to the configuration in the near future, but in this context it should perhaps be noted that Kim Jong-il has inherited a Politburo that aged and grew crusty in his father's last years as old names reappeared and relatively new names came and went. In December 1993, for example, Kim Il Sung's younger brother Kim Yong-ju reappeared after seventeen years in obscurity and was appointed as one of three vice-presidents. Also re-appointed to alternate membership status after demotion some fifteen years ago was Yang Hyong-sop. At the same time, Kim Il Sung dismissed Kim Dal Hyon (economic planning) and Kim Yong-sun (foreign affairs), two younger Politburo members who have been assessed by foreigners with whom they have had dealings to be relatively pragmatic in a DPRK context. The reappointment of such people would be significant in one sense, but it would be easy to overestimate this significance because in another sense it would merely be restoring the pre-December 1993 configuration.

The specter of a monolithic ideology hostile to structural reform, a leader whose legitimacy derives directly from that ideology and whose record suggests that he is an ardent supporter of that ideology, a Politburo long schooled in the habit of unconditional loyalty to leadership dictates, and a ruling party that is hugely insulated from the influence of socio-economic forces and from international trends, has focused on inherently unpredictable forms of convulsive change such as through

popular unrest, military mutiny or palace revolt.⁴ But while the near-future collapse theory has its advocates, the collapse of a state as tightly organized as the DPRK is a momentous scenario to contemplate, and one which would require more than just an extrapolation of existing economic trends to be persuasive. The agents commonly mentioned are simply unknown as agents of regime transformation in Asian Leninist party states and, in addition to the discipline and the rigorous organizational defenses of the Leninist party against challenges from this quarter, for all its Kimist distortions, not only does the DPRK possess an underlying regional, ideological and, by now, historical identity that sets it apart from its southern neighbor, but the main outlines of the system are almost certainly accepted by a considerable proportion of the population.

The Party in Charge Again?

However, when viewed from a comparative angle, a more plausible force for change from within almost certainly exists, and that force is the desire to restore socialist legality, which in the first place means restoring the rule of the Korean Workers' Party over the arbitrary decision-making process of the Kims.⁵ This was the banner under which the Soviet leadership gathered post Stalin, and the Chinese leadership post Mao, and in both cases they overturned the immediate succession arrangements.

4 See, for example, Foster-Carter (1993: 173).

5 Suh (1983: 58) notes some of the more egregious examples of Kim Il Sung's ignoring the 1972 Constitution and the party by-laws. On the general concept of socialist legality, in the absence of first-hand evidence we posit, from broad anecdotal evidence, that DPRK legal culture resembles Soviet legal culture as it took shape in the Stalin era, comprising strongly compartmentalized legal and extralegal components—the former addressing itself to non-political cases, the latter to political cases. It is the latter mode that we are concerned with here, whereby people whose transgressions are assessed according to political and not criminal criteria routinely do not have the benefit of any due process of law. For more on this distinction see Robert Sharlet (1977: 155–179).

The argument runs as follows: while Kim Il Sung was alive it was impossible for Politburo members to feel secure in their positions. The KWP Politburo and Secretariat configurations have been quite stable in recent years, but nevertheless there is ample evidence of the persistent flouting of party by-laws by Kim Il Sung. Party Congresses have become irregular, the distinction between party and government heavily blurred, and a number of high cadres have suffered demotion and outright purging at Kim Il Sung's hands over the years, including a number of current members of the Politburo such as Li Jong-ok, Kim Yong-ju, Choe Gwang, Kye Ung-tae, Yang Hyong-sop and Yon Hyong-muk.⁶

However loyal Politburo members may have been to Kim while he lived, and however much their destiny is now tied to that of Kim Jong-il, their first priority must now be the simple human instinct to protect themselves, if they can, from further arbitrary rule and from the constant fear of criticism, dismissal and worse. To make their move they and their potential constituents in the bureaucracy and the military need only agree on one thing, that they do not wish to be ruled by Kim Jong-il when the party could rule in its own right. They may take some time to negotiate the defenses set up by Kim Il Sung against such a scenario, chiefly in the form of multiple, overlapping security networks, but ultimately they must prevail against Kim Jong-il who, at his father's death, had no known graduate of his patronage system and no one of his generation in the Politburo. This latter point cannot be emphasized too strongly: reports of generational change in leadership circles have eddied about for

6 Evidence of the bullying style of leadership employed by Kim Il Sung has long been anecdotal. While this writer was in Pyongyang in 1975 Soviet bloc diplomats provided various examples of present and former leading cadres who had been subjected to humiliating rebukes by Kim. This is backed up by the recent report of a defector, Cho Myong Chol, son of an Administration Council minister, who has detailed the cases of former Finance Minister Kim Gyong Ryon and former Politburo member Kim Hwan. See *Vantage Point* XVIII, 5: 28-29, May 1995.

years, as have reports of younger people (that is, people in their fifties and sixties) exercising power behind the scenes, but these reports cannot be confirmed and, more important, in the ten years or so since the "generational change" theory of leadership transfer first surfaced, there is no evidence in the form of significant modification of policies to sustain it. Still surrounding the younger Kim is a clique of men, ages ranging from the late sixties to mid eighties, almost all of whom have been in the leadership circle for at least twenty to thirty years.

The reestablishment of socialist legality within the party is by no means a straightforward process, not just because of the individuals involved, but because disdain for "bourgeois legalism" is deeply entrenched in the Leninist political cultures, beginning with Lenin himself.⁷ However, if socialist legality under a collective leadership were restored, what would be the complexion of a collective leadership? At present the KWP is an atomized political party, long used to functioning in an exclusively vertical fashion as the instrument for exalting the Great Leader. Policy debate is expressly forbidden under the proclamation of the party's "monolithic ideology," we may assume that horizontal ties are practically nonexistent, and may further assume that the principal players, long used to court intrigue as a substitute for politics, will be extremely suspicious and wary of each other. This suggests that policy articulation in a restored KWP would be a tortuous, fractional process, with no single figure exerting decisive influence in the short term, and no Deng Xiaoping-like figure on the horizon. In short, from a DPRK perspective, while the establishment of a more collective leadership would be a decisive step forward, it may not automatically bring about a pragmatic orientation, for this could be held back by a new form of stagnation in which the tasks are clearly

7 On this point and its consequences for the phenomenon of cult of personality see Palthiel (1983: 49-64).

perceived but party and government are stymied by a malevolent legacy.

Mention of Deng suggests that we might find some policy guidance from a similar source—namely, intra-party struggles of the past. Information on these is sketchy, to put it mildly. The last overt challenge to Kim that we know of occurred in 1956, and the last time Kim publicly alluded to the policy positions of purged party members occurred in 1966.

The major issues articulated by the would-be challengers in 1956, led by Pak Chang Ok and Choe Jang Ik, were Kim's dictatorial tendencies, the need for a more people-oriented and less state-oriented economy and the principle of merit over cronyism in party appointments. These issues hardly amounted to a manifesto, but the criticism on the economy was relevant at a time when the DPRK was embarking upon a policy of giving priority to heavy industrialization, and has continuing relevance today.⁸

The positions of those demoted in 1966 can only be inferred from Kim Il Sung's criticism of them in a 1968 speech, but in a DPRK context they too appear to have been "economic rationalists," expressing reservations about the effects of the Equal Emphasis policy adopted in 1962 whereby equal emphasis was given to industrial and military production. In Kim's eyes they had "clung to the outdated notions of an official capacity and norm, mythicized science and technology, restricted the initiatives of the masses, stopped working people from working more, kneeled before difficulties, feared mass innovation, and attempted to block the grand onward movement,"⁹ from which we may read that they feared that the country's industrial establishment was being over-extended, resources mismanaged, produc-

8 For further details see Scalapino and Lee (1972: 510ff) and Okonogi (1994: 196ff).

9 As quoted in Scalapino and Lee (1972: 610).

tivity and innovation neglected and quantity emphasized over quality—issues also as relevant today as they were in the 1960s.

If it seems prudent to expect alternative positions to be formulated from within the DPRK polity rather than on the basis of foreign models of reform, then the best-developed policy positions relate to advocating a more people-centered economy, emphasizing more balanced economic development, raising people's living standards, promoting technological innovation and downplaying military production. Subordinate political themes include decrying cronyism and dictatoralism. Scant though the evidence is, the concept of a restored KWP initially rallying around the concept of socialist economic rationalism and socialist legality has historical sanction, while the concept of a restored KWP plunging forthwith into a China-style reform process has no sanction from within.

The party need only agree to reestablish party authority over the leader to initiate a potentially far-reaching process of reform. This is because withdrawal of personal dictatorship would bring into play sectoral influences that are currently marginalized— influences such as the military and the military-industrial complex, the much-vaunted technocrats, the foreign trade and foreign policy bureaucracy, regional party apparatuses and so on. The more that Politburo members are forced to rely on constituencies such as these instead of unconditional loyalty to an autocrat, the more the interests of these constituencies would contend to be represented in policy.

Such a process also suggests a solution to the chief conundrum of late de-Stalinization—namely, that the party could not countenance reforms because in all probability it would not survive them. This is persuasive as it stands, but in restoring socialist legalism the party would be unleashing an unintended reform process. Put another way, in their desire to take care of the immediate personal threat of arbitrary leadership rule, Politburo members may not either care about or focus on the long-term consequences for party rule. Or, if they do, the imperative of the

moment might persuade them to take care of the immediate threat to their well-being now, and hope to control the less immediate threats posed by reform further down the track. But whatever the Politburo members might calculate, if the passing of the Kim Il Sung system brings about a reduction in the degree of regimentation, an increasing reliance on material incentives, more rational decision making, and more vertical information flows, the advances in terms of pragmatically oriented decision-making processes might be considerable.¹⁰

The effect of this process on the economy is difficult to predict. However, to some extent the experiences of China and more particularly Vietnam are relevant. The Vietnamese case suggests that there is no avalanche of foreign investment capital waiting to descend on the DPRK. Several years after the economic liberalization policies were promulgated in 1986, foreign investment projects were still typically based on the low-risk, low-technology, quick-return model, and were usually operated by a small number of foreign firms pursuing high-risk strategies while the bulk of potential investors remained in a holding pattern.¹¹ This pattern would almost certainly be repeated in the DPRK, especially if ROK investment continues to be held at arm's length. The most likely scenario is that the DPRK would take its place low down in the hierarchy of Asia-Pacific economies as a source of cheap labor and then begin to slowly work its way up in a process that may take several decades.

But beyond setting the scene in this fashion, it is practically impossible to present an option for substantial structural reform in the economy that is politically value-free, for the course of reform will be strongly affected by specific military and foreign policies. Certainly foreign investment funds will not flow at all, and the capital needs upon which all other elements in the

10 On this point see Byung-Chul Koh (1985: 251).

11 Freeman (1992: 287-302).

reform package are predicated will not be met, while the nuclear problem persists, and especially while the DPRK continues to expect that an international consortium will meet what are essentially blackmail demands over its nuclear program. In addition, many potential investors are unlikely to be interested in the absence of any ROK-DPRK rapprochement, but the forces impelling the DPRK to a policy of continuing hostility and competition with the ROK issue from its very identity as a nation-state and are unlikely to be modified significantly in the near future. This stance may prove to be a significant shaper of reform, with external linkages favoring countries with long-standing historical ties with the DPRK such as China and Russia, rather than traditional ROK allies such as the US and the West.

Conclusion

To sum up the case: Kim Jong-il is unlikely to be an agent of reform, both because it would undermine his position and because his life-long record indicates deep commitment to the current ideology. He has the formidable advantage of incumbency in a Stalinist system, and the issue of socialist legality is quite possibly the only issue around which would-be opponents could rally, since the possibility of rallying around alternative policy frameworks has almost certainly been expunged from the system. If the Politburo successfully reasserts itself on what is essentially a procedural point, a collective leadership could emerge, bound together not by compatible stances on issues but by a common need for personal security.

What would a collective leadership be seeking to do in policy terms? It could hardly become more hard-line, but a consideration of the actual people involved suggests that few, if any, of them, could conceptualize clearly a process of reform. Furthermore, even if they could, a principal argument against liberalization has always been that such a trend could only let loose forces that would ultimately destroy the system. But while this may

seem persuasive, political parties, regimes and even systems seem to be quite good at managing their own downfall at the best of times, and hence a liberalizing trend with unpredictable consequences for its perpetrators might therefore take hold over a period of time as the product of any number of forces—wishful thinking, the illusion of control, or desperate expediency—but emerge it will, for in a North Korean context it now means nothing less than joining the modern world.

The central political fact of life for Kim Jong-il is simple: if few rulers have had a clearer path to power than Kim Jong-il, then few rulers in the modern era can have come to power with more options closed off by the actions of their predecessors—specifically the virulence and force with which a personal autocracy buttressed by a personality cult has been installed at the center of the political system. Kim Jong-il then adds his own set of disabilities to the situation, beginning with a working life spent devoted to issues that are essentially irrelevant to reform. Reform will therefore need to come despite, rather than because of, the KWP's intentions, and it will lack a clear conceptual framework. The Leninist party political system is likely to remain in place, and this obviously means that any change that does occur would evolve from within the party and from its efforts to restore a measure of socialist legality. Quite likely the process would be messy, self-contradictory, piecemeal and protracted—far more so than has been the case in Vietnam or China—and the DPRK would probably continue to present the same image and the same array of state policies to its neighbors for some years to come. This may hardly seem appropriate given the enormity of the country's problems, but it is all that currently seems possible.

To use the term "reform" in relation to DPRK policies in this context may well become appropriate at some point, but at present it is premature for, to restate the key argument, some key institutional and ideological issues will need to be addressed before party and state institutions can address concrete issues of structural reform in any real sense. Even assuming a strong

commitment to reform in Pyongyang, the state is heir to a profoundly idiosyncratic ideology and to a set of party and state institutions whose operations have been thoroughly moulded by that ideology. Whatever pressures might develop in the outside world, the initial steps will almost certainly be closely and minutely thrashed out within existing ideological structures.

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