

Adaptive Process of the North Korean Political System in Times of Regime Crisis

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While more than three years have passed since the death of Kim Il Sung, his son Kim Jong-il, *de facto* political successor, is only now being inaugurated general secretary and not even yet state president. Because the economy has been becoming crippled since the breakdown of socialist regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, some may presume that the junior Kim and his associates have been waiting the right time for the celebration of his inauguration. However, recent developments in North Korea may refute this presumption. There exist some indicators that the formal appointment has been structurally constrained by the widespread crisis throughout the entire system. In other words, the postponement of his formal ascension has reflected North Korea's crisis.

It should be noted that given this crisis situation, the political system in general and Kim Jong-il and his associates in particular are dependent upon the most cohesive organization, the military. This leads us to the following questions. What are the sources of the general crisis? How does the political system cope with the crisis? Is the newly emerging structure of authority relations, centered around Kim and the military, appropriate to cope with the crisis?

In answering these questions, this paper will rely upon concepts and propositions developed in systems sciences, particularly political system and general systems approaches. These approaches not only provide us with a macro perspective to illustrate the entire picture of the North Korean system but also help us explain and predict the dynamic relationships among various levels of system.

Basic Concepts and Propositions

In an attempt to inquire into changes in the North Korean system in general and its political system in particular it is necessary to illustrate basic concepts that compose and characterize the whole configuration.

System, Subsystem, and Environment. From the perspective of general systems, every system is open and interacts with its environment for exchanging energy and information. A system consists of several subsystems; in particular the North Korean system is made of political, ideological, economic and cultural subsystems. One subsystem is surrounded by the others as well as the higher-level systems; thus, to a subsystem, all the others compose an environment. For analytic purposes, we may divide the environment into two: the external environment made of other surrounding systems; and the internal environment, the neighboring subsystems. (Hereafter a system modified by an adjective, such as political, economic or ideological, refers to a subsystem.)

In the discipline of political science, it is presumed that for the persistence of the system as a whole the political system has to maintain its function of authoritative allocation of social values.¹ A political system's steady functioning can be guaranteed only when it properly copes with fluctuating external and internal

1 David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 129-34.

environment. North Korea's political system is being threatened not only by economic stagnation but also by structural dissonance with neighboring subsystems.

Regime and Authority Structure. Form or type of a system, which is called a regime, is dependent upon the structural configuration in which subsystems are related. Since the concept of a regime has been extensively used by political scientists, it has been believed to be a form of political system. However, because a political system continuously interacts with other subsystems and because it has the specific function of producing binding decisions, we may say that the concept of a regime is relevant to the structural configuration of an entire system. For instance, "socialist regime" in North Korea refers to that system with various characteristics such as one-party dominated politics, state-owned economy, top-down official ideology, and so on.

In the political system, the structure of authority relations (or authority structure) may be one of the most important elements. Depending upon the structure of authority relations among organizations or political elites, the conversion process from inputs to outputs may be different.² Accordingly, alteration or modification of the authority structure may bring about a meaningful change in the form of the political system, i. e., regime. In the political system where power is concentrated in the hands of a top leader as in North Korea, the impact of his fate upon the authority structure will be enormous. His disappearance from the political scene, by either natural death or ouster, will result in significant changes of the authority structure. But physical disappearance is not the only means for such change. In a crisis, the political elite may intentionally alter the authority structure in an attempt to cope with fluctuations in internal and external environments. What should be noted is that such change in the

2 David Easton, *The Analysis of Political Structure* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 262-64.

authority structure may be followed by a systemic change of regime, which could occur incrementally or suddenly.

Open System and Coevolution. According to the presumption of general systems and political system approach, the system in general and the political system in particular are open systems continuously interacting with their surrounding environment.³ The socialist system is no exception in that it has to cope with the internal disturbances and external environmental changes in order to maintain the innate economy and its survival. Of course, history shows that the degree of openness varies depending upon the form of system, i. e., regime, and that the degree is not consistent throughout its lifetime. A system with a low degree of openness may avoid direct impact of fluctuation in the environment. In this respect, the North Korean system has kept relatively limited openness in comparison to other socialist systems. Under the banner of *juche*, meaning self-reliance, it has successfully consolidated a peculiar form of socialist regime, the so-called Socialism of Our Own Style.

However, this does not mean that North Korea has been a closed system. While having managed to keep equidistance towards the Soviet Union and China, it has adopted a development model and control mechanism similar to the ones of those two systems. Furthermore, North Korea as a part of a set of coupled systems (the divided two Koreas) has interacted with South Korea in a very sensitive way. In particular, in the process of establishment and consolidation of the dictatorial authority structure during the 1970s, the coupled systems produced a demonstration effect and proved Jantsch's concept of "coevolution."⁴

3 L. von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory: Essays on Its Foundations and Development* (New York: George Braziller, 1968).

4 E. Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe: Scientific and Human Implications of the Emerging Paradigms of Evolution* (Pergamon Press, 1980).

Complexity and Structural Dissonance. A system and its subsystems have close relationships among themselves and with the environment, and they produce a complex situation that the political elite cannot control. Because of this property of system complexity, no single political elite can become the determinant of the operation of a whole system. The political elite may be constrained not only by the structure they established in the process of pursuing their self-imposed goals but also by the environmental changes that are beyond their control. The systems approach illustrates that the North Korean case is not an exception to this complexity.⁵ Even if Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong-il have taken top posts of the important organizations, they could not have molded all the various parts, such as political, economic, cultural and ideological subsystems, according to their intentions. Each subsystem develops to yield a duality, a separation between official and non-official spheres, which then leads to symmetry-breaking, that is, structural dissonance within the system.⁶ This development creates a more complex structure, which may deviate from the intention of the political elite.

Based on the basic concepts above, we can refute two fallacious suppositions in describing the political phenomena in North Korea: that it has remained a closed system, and that Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong-il have exercised absolute power and have been able to manage all variables of the operation of the system. Furthermore, understanding these concepts enables us to ex-

5 Y. P. Rhee, "Nonequilibrium Thermodynamics Approach to Korean Unification Process: A Search for New Paradigm," in Y. P. Rhee, ed., *Complex Systems Model of South-North Korean Integration* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1996), pp. 4-6.

6 Sung Chull Kim, "Systemic Change in North Korea and Development of the South-North Korean Relationship," in Y. P. Rhee, ed., *Complex Systems Model of South-North Korean Integration*, (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1996), pp. 127-34.

plain the dynamic nature of the socialist system in general and the North Korean system in particular.

Specifically, the following propositions can be presented. First, the openness and complexity of a system are distinctive especially when it is under a high degree of stress, commonly termed a crisis situation. The reason is that in crisis, these properties foster a rough flow of information and place the system between order and surprise. That is, a system with such properties may develop to a state of "far-from-equilibrium," to use Prigogine's term, or "near the edge of chaos," to quote Kauffman. In this situation, the system hesitates among various possible directions of a change. Over the long run the directions are either unpredictable, or predictable within a limited scope. Furthermore, the change does not take place smoothly but with sudden leaps.⁷

Second, it is notable that in the socialist system where elite shift is not institutionalized, a state of far-from-equilibrium may escalate through a power transfer.⁸ The sudden death of a top elite will bring about an intense flow of information between organizations and individuals and alteration of the existing elite composite, depending upon configuration of the coalition among various social groups. This is true also for the system under a charismatic leader in that the concentrated power structure will be replaced by a more unstable interaction, or sometimes severe struggle, between high-ranking officials with different ideologies, interests, and desired policy alternatives.

Whatever the pattern of the political elite's response may be, it contributes to the formation of the dissipative structure through which new authority relations take place. The emergence of a dissipative structure usually represents an evolution-

7 I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984) pp. 140-45; S. Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: The Search for Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 1-30.

8 M. Rush, "The Problems in Communist Regimes," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 32 (1978), pp. 169-70.

ary process from a less complicated system to a more complex one. Such a change is best exemplified by the division of labor between party and state in Deng's period in China and the emergence of political pluralism under Gorbachev's era in the Soviet Union. In other words, a system in the far-from-equilibrium state is able to experience evolution as well.⁹

Third, the changing pattern of the system in the far-from-equilibrium state is not completely dependent upon randomness. There may be "preferential correlation" or "preferential interconnections" in the pattern of change.¹⁰ In a militarized socialist system such as North Korea, the political system probably brings about the weakening of party control over the military, and then the military with its high coherence can play a distinctive role in the process of emergence of the new authority structure. Depending upon the historical pattern of development of the relationship between the two organizations, the degree of military intervention into the process may vary: from the decisive actor as a ruler or guardian to the minor actor as a moderator.¹¹ There may exist a preferential correlation between the historical role of the military and its influence on the systemic change of the political system. That is, the more the system relies upon the military to consolidate the power base, the more the military is able to expand its influence on the formation of a new authority structure in the process of power transfer.

Fourth, if the political elite tries to utilize the military to consolidate the power base, the military's propensity to expand its influence gains strength. This leads the political system into the tendency of "anomaly of adaptive process." Anomaly of adaptive process means that the system tends to become less

9 E. Laszlo, *The Interconnected Universe: Conceptual Foundations of Transdisciplinary Unified Theory* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1995) pp. 3-21.

10 Ibid., pp. 4-5.

11 E. A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977) pp. 21-27.

efficient for its maintenance by adapting to the institutions to which it is accustomed, while excluding the very alternatives that would produce better outcomes along same experience.¹² In the case of North Korea, the current situation that the political elite tends to rely upon the military reflects this anomaly of adaptive process. The enhancement of the military's position will foster its independence from the party and bring about loss of close relationship between them. In other words, the more the position of the military is enhanced, the more the structural coupling between the party and the military will decrease. On the basis of this logic, we may presume, even if in a limited scope, that the emergence of a new authority structure with military's elevated position will provide the organization with a prominent role in the ongoing systemic change in the North Korean political system.

North Korean System in Crisis

As we have noted, the North Korean system consists of several subsystems, and thus political system should be understood in the context of complex interaction within the entire system. According to an empirical study on crisis levels for North Korea,¹³ the level of crisis, in general, has gradually increased—and in 1992 it reached the point the former socialist systems of the Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had shown on the eve of their breakdown, their critical limit. The fact that the crisis level in North Korea has exceeded this critical limit does not necessarily mean that a radical systemic transformation will occur immediately. It is believed, however, that the existing regime is no longer stable or safe. Furthermore, inasmuch as the

12 G. March and J. P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 63.

13 Sung Chull Kim, et al., *The Crisis Levels and Sustainability of the North Korean Socialist Regime: An Empirical Assessment* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 1997 forthcoming).

North Korean socialist system comprises something more than simply the elite composite centered around Kim Jong-il, we can postulate that the office of Kim Jong-il is unstable even though at first glance they seem to wield power over the party, the state and the military. Therefore, the North Korean situation can be compared with a ship whose captain, even though strong enough to control the crew, is not safe if the ship is sinking.¹⁴

What are the main sources of the crisis? There are two sources: structural dissonance among the subsystems of the socialist system, and lack of system capacity to adapt itself to the rapidly changing environment.

First, the structural dissonance has come from the dual operation of the system owing to the expansion of a non-official sphere into which goals and values pursued by the existing regime cannot penetrate. This dual operation now takes place in all aspects of the North Korean system. For example, the second economy or black market has expanded and erodes the principles of the centrally planned economic system. The weakening of the consciousness of collectivism among the general public has contributed to the malfunction of the official ideological system, Juche Thought. The emergence of counterculture among the youth has been conducive to the widening gap between generations and to the diffusion of the cultural system.

Since the subsystems are structurally coupled, their dual operation has been harmful for the entire system, intensifying structural dissonance or disharmony between subsystems. The system comes into a state of contradiction between subsystems, which is symmetry-breaking process. The entire system finally comes to a state of far-from-equilibrium, or near the edge of chaos.

Of the many cases of this structural dissonance, let us take an example of contradiction between the ideological and economic systems, i. e., between the cult of Kim Jong-il and the lack of

14 Ibid.

material incentive. Ironically, this dissonance came from the junior Kim's contribution to the establishment of his father's personality cult and artificial charisma. During the 1970s and 1980s, he became the only authoritative successor of Kimilsungism and Juche Thought and made every effort to uphold them as the ideological texts coming next to Marxism-Leninism and Maoism. Furthermore, Kim Jong-il played a major role in drafting the Ten Principles for the Consolidation of Juche Thought in which he depicted his father as the infallible great leader and emphasized unconditional subordination to him. Of course, the propaganda of Kim Il Sung's resistance movement against Japanese colonial rule was the most important element in the process of personality cult. Here the junior Kim distorted history. For instance, he asserted that in 1930 the eighteen-year-old Kim Il Sung presented basic principles of self-reliance and critiqued the previous independence movement that had relied upon foreign assistance.

As Weber has noted, however, charisma cannot be transferred from generation to generation; it disappears when a person cannot exercise superhuman ability.¹⁵ This would be true in North Korea. During Kim Il Sung's era, the North Korean media devoted itself to describe junior Kim as the only possible political successor to Kim Il Sung. After the elder Kim's death Kim Jong-il's leadership image was erected by a symbolic slogan depicting him as his father's personification: "Great Leader Kim Il Sung is Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, and Dear Leader Kim Jong-il is Great Leader Kim Il Sung." However, little Kim has failed to carry on his daddy's charismatic presence. In the eyes of the general public, his performance is inferior to that of his father.

Considering that socialist systems under the second generation pursued legitimation not through disseminating revolutionary values but by introducing rationality in economic policies,

15 H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, ed., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) pp. 245-50.

the greatness of Kim Jong-il should have been able to have been proved in terms of modification of Juche Thought and increase in material payoff. But the transfer of power from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong-il has not been followed by such changes. Neither has the symbolic manipulation been followed by material incentive. In fact, the gap is widening. The crippled economy has shown a minus GNP growth rate for seven years in a row, and the food shortage exacerbated after two consecutive years of flooding in 1995 and 1996. Moreover, no immediate economic recovery is expected even if the four-party talks open and the DPRK-US and DPRK-Japan relationships are normalized. Accordingly, there will be a time lag between North Korea's opening policy as a political output and material payoff as outcome. As a result, the more Pyongyang emphasizes the personality cult as the foundation for Kim Jong-il's political succession, the worse the structural dissonance between political and economic systems will develop.

Second, the inability to adapt to the changing environment—lack of moral support from the international community, weakening economic ties and cooperation with foreign countries, and inability to secure security-related resources such as rice and crude oil—has driven the North Korea system into crisis. The system's incapacity stems from the old autarky policy in the name of "self-reliance" which constrained not only expansion of economic relations with the Western world but also adaptation to the rapidly changing environment.

North Korea with its low openness to the environment has been able to maintain a low level of vulnerability to the coupling effect, meaning that frequent and intense relationships between system and environment may lower the degree of independence, easily transmitting environmental fluctuation to the system. Since the breakdown of the other socialist systems, it has been proved that this North Korean policy could not guarantee complete immunity from the environmental fluctuation. Russia and China broke the old tradition of preferential trade with the

DPRK, shifting from barter to commerce in hard currency. Furthermore, they took steps to abolish so-called friendship prices on crude oil and began to ask for near-world market prices. These changes drove North Korea into an acute shortage of energy, which has not been considered seriously in light of the globally well-known food shortage.

In sum, the structural dissonance and incapacity to adapt is what has brought the North Korean socialist system into a crisis. From the systems perspective, this crisis represents the status of far-from-equilibrium. It should be noted that a system in such a situation may evolve to a more complex system with a new order. As we shall note, however, the North Korean political system has manifested the anomaly of adaptive process, which will drive the system in the direction opposite that of evolution.

Anomaly of Adaptive Process of the Political System

We have seen that crisis in general has degraded the viability of the existing form of system, called Socialism of Our Own Style. Under the circumstances, the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994 accelerated this tendency. It created uncontrollable mass hysteria among the people, and as the subject of their obedience was taken away, their loyalty was set floating free.¹⁶ As a consequence, the political elite centered around Kim Jong-il have become constrained in their policy choices. This appears in detail as follows.

Kim Jong-il has had no choice but to keep a transitional authority structure that resembles that of an emergence regime in a Third World country.¹⁷ After Kim Il Sung's death, he has wielded power through the positions of supreme commander of the People's Army and chairman of the Defense Committee. The

16 David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 309.

17 Kim, "Systemic Change in North Korea," pp. 145-47.

exercise of power through military position is abnormal, one of the prerogatives of an emergency. In particular, the use of position of supreme commander is an illicit exercise of power because the DPRK constitution revised in 1992 did not codify any such term regarding that position.

What should be noted is that even though junior Kim is trying to secure his status by establishing such a peculiar transitional authority structure, to resort to military leadership necessarily brings the restructuring of the relationship between party and military. This restructuring is best reflected in the editorial of the party organ, *Rodong Shinmun*, on 16 February 1997, which celebrated the fifty-fifth birthday of Kim Jong-il: "If it were not for the People's Army, our people, our state, and our party could not exist." In other words, the North Korean political system is slipping into the anomaly of adaptive process: it is becoming less efficient for the sake of its own maintenance through reliance upon the institution to which it is accustomed, while excluding alternatives that would be better.

In socialist systems, the Leninist tradition that the Communist Party guides the military was generally accepted. In actual practice decision-making organizations in the party and commissar organization in the military did predominate within the military. On the one hand, top elite in the politburo and the military affairs committee collectively produce decisions on military affairs such as personnel, defense industry, military strategy, mobilization and so on. Cadres of rank and file in the departments of the Communist Party made detailed rules and regulations for the implementation of the decision. On the other hand, the commissar organization and political officers in various levels of the military unit would play the role of supervising daily affairs and indoctrination of the soldiers. Under the norm of "party guidance over the military," all military orders had to be counter-signed by a commissar and the commissars were responsible for the actions of the military unit. In other words,

there existed a close relationship by which the party dominated the military through bureaucratic mechanisms.

In North Korea, the presumption of party guidance over the military has been proven a fallacious myth. The Korean Worker's Party no longer "guides" (exercises control over) the People's Army, nor is the military under party bureaucratic control. The commissar organization and political officers still remain in the military unit to promote loyalty to Kim Jong-il among the men, but their function does not depend upon the traditional norm of party guidance. In a closed-session speech delivered to high-ranking party officials in December 1996, Kim Jong-il was quoted as saying that party's morale is so degraded that it has to learn from the military. Furthermore, military officers are taking over the roles of party officials in many fields. For instance, as recent defectors have testified, in collective farms military officers are in charge of farm management for production of grain quotas.¹⁸

The greater the military's independence, the more the structural coupling between party and military loosens. We can find some indicators that the military has become an autonomous organization. First, the position of the military elite has been enhanced. In fact, since 1996 high-ranking military officers have begun to be seated at positions in the party hierarchy higher than ever before. The two vice marshals—Cho Myung-rok, chief of the General Politburo of the People's Army, and Kim Young-choon, chief of the General Staff of the People's Army—were seated sixth and seventh at the anniversary of People's Army on 25 April 1997.

Second, Pyongyang is urging all sectors of society to learn military-style discipline. In the December 1996 closed-session speech, condemning the party for bureaucratic malfunction, Kim Jong-il called it sardonically the "corpse party" and "elderly party." In contrast, he praised the military for keeping high

18 *Dong-a Ilbo*, 15 May 1997.

aspiration and morale in times of crisis and instructed all the propaganda squad members to follow the military mode.

Third, as the degree of military autonomy increases, the existing official ideological system is going through an ordeal. "The Red Banner," symbolic slogan of Communist revolution, has been propagated extensively since the beginning of 1996. At the dawn of the year the organs of party, military, and youth league all carried the same editorial under the headline, "Let us march through this year in full force, holding high the Red Banner." The slogan of Red Banner is not strange for North Koreans, nor has it replaced, yet, Juche Thought as an official ideology; the former has no sophisticated proposition as seen in the latter. However, the slogan catches our special attention because the mass media calls it a kind of philosophy. Furthermore, frequency of the quotation of this Red Banner philosophy in the party organ has increased significantly, while Juche Thought is becoming somewhat less frequent.

The Red Banner slogan is sure to have close relationship with the ascendance of the military. This can be reasoned from recent emphasis on the construction of Three Encampments under the Red Banner: the politico-ideological, economic and *military* encampments. Setting up these "encampments" is regarded as replacement for the old Three Revolutions in ideology, technology, and culture. Considering that the Three Revolutions has been the essential element of Juche Thought, this replacement has a significant political meaning. In particular, the emergence of the military encampment is distinctive. Given the situation that Juche Thought is now less frequently quoted, this change in the official symbol of ideological system is closely related to the change of the authority structure in the political system.

Consequently, the political system in North Korea has been experiencing maladaptation to the external and the internal environments in crisis. This anomaly of adaptive process is exemplified by enhancement of the position and increasing autonomy of the military in the newly emerging authority

structure after the death of Kim Il Sung. We may be able to predict the future of the North Korean system as a whole only in limited scope, but one thing is clear about the relationship between the political system and the overall North Korean system. The anomaly is contributing to retardation of self-organizing process of the entire system for emergence of a more complex form of system and, in turn, to the lowering of viability of not only the political system but the system as a whole.

Conclusion

From the systems sciences perspective, the North Korean system is now in a state of far-from-equilibrium. Not only dual operation of subsystems due to the emergence of the informal sector but also structural dissonance owing to symmetry-breaking among subsystems have driven the entire system into a crisis. Furthermore, the breakdown of the socialist systems and the death of Kim Il Sung have contributed to the deepening of the crisis. However, Kim Jong-il and his associates, instead of taking alternatives which may be more efficient, have been trying to cope with this situation by relying upon the institutions with which they are familiar. They are utilizing the military rather than taking reform-oriented policies: in particular, enhancement of the position of military elite and the upholding of the military-style discipline under the new symbolic slogan of red banner.

Because of the division of Korea, the military has been regarded as the most important organization for the security of the entire North Korean system, and it may be natural for the political elite to employ it in an attempt to confront the external fluctuation and internal disorder. But the adaptation pattern of the political system is reflecting an anomaly of adaptive process. It is notable that this retards the self-organizing process of the entire system, the process that may lead the system to a more evolved and complex form. The military's predominance creates

a simple, militant, and monolithic political culture, and it erodes the organic relationship between the military and the party. The party no longer "guides" the military through bureaucratic mechanisms; instead there becomes greater independence from party control.

Therefore, even though at first sight Kim Jong-il seems to control the whole system, the military comes to play an important role in the new authority structure by injecting its power into all sectors of the system. Consequently, the military constrains incremental adjustment of the political system by hindering the adoption of reform-oriented policies. This may pave the way to a radical transformation of the existing form of system, Socialism of Our Own Style.