

North Korea's Civil-Military-Party Relations and Regime Stability

■ Jeung, Young-Tai



KOREA INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL UNIFICATION

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The analyses, comments and other opinions contained in this monograph are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Korea Institute for National Unification.

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I . Introduction

North Korea is justifying its National Defense Commission-centered political structure on the premise that the internal and external environment it is facing today is akin to a wartime situation. This is quite evident from its frequent reference to the NDC-centered structure to the ‘military committee’ during the Kim Il-Sung era. According to a North Korean scholar:

“The decision to create a military committee was part of a project to develop a superior national leadership structure that would guarantee victory in a total war by mobilizing all available national resources. The military committee was a revolutionary political system that made it possible to firmly realize the military-first revolutionary leadership by centralizing all national power, from the central government to the provinces, in the military committee and making it absolutely mandatory for all citizens, political parties, social organizations, and national agencies, to obey the instructions and decisions of the military committee.”¹

¹ Lee Cheol, “The Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong-Il’s Unique Ideas concerning the Military-first Revolutionary Leadership,” (Pyongyang: Social Science Publishers, 2002), p. 30.

As a result, the North Korean leadership has never relaxed its effort to reinforce political and ideological education of the ‘People’s Army,’ even while it tried to develop the military-dominant national political structure as it existed during the Kim Il-Sung era. The same scholar emphatically explained this effort in these terms:

“The Great Suryong (leader) decided to dispatch highly capable Party cadres to military units to strengthen the political and ideological sinews of the People’s Army, inculcate its self-reliant posture, and root out the dogmatism and flunkeyism that were widespread in the People’s Army. This measure allowed the government to carry out priority projects such as safeguarding our Party with revolutionary traditions, arming our soldiers with the Party’s policies and guidelines, and inculcating their loyalty to the Party.”

Clearly, then, Kim Jong-Il has inherited this ‘military-first ideology’ from the Suryong himself and further refined it into “a political strategy suitable for today’s realistic conditions.”

At this point, the following five questions concerning North Korea’s ‘military-first’ political system present themselves: First, under this ‘military-focused’ ideology, what does it mean to put the military at the forefront? Second, what is the relationship between the Party and the Military under the NDC-centered national political structure? Third, is it possible for the military to harness independent (political) power that can pose a threat to the Kim Jong-Il regime, given the military-first structure? Fourth, why is Kim Jong-Il placing such emphasis upon the ‘civil-military unity’ campaign, and what impact will this campaign have on civil-military relations? Finally, fifth, will any fissure which emerges in the civil-military unity possibly pose any threat to the Kim Jong-Il regime?

These questions concerning the North Korean political system under Kim Jong-Il are basically questions about the dynamics of the interrelationships between the Party, the Military, and the People. Since the Party and the People both should fall into the category of ‘civilian,’ the issue can be reduced simply to ‘civil-military relations.’

At least two theoretical models come to mind when we discuss civil-military relations. The ‘conflict model’ emphasizes the importance of formal control mechanisms, while the ‘participatory model’ emphasizes the importance of informal control mechanisms, as well as interactions between the military and the entire political sector (Party). These theoretical attempts to examine the Party-Military relations in the Communist states have a number of practical limitations in that they have been used in attempts to analyze these relationships in the former USSR (and, partly the PRC), particularly during the Brezhnev era. Nevertheless, the “participatory model” has been quite useful in explaining the reasons why the military, in most Communist states, including North Korea, has faithfully kept its place, even though many military coups d’etat had swept across the Third World like an epidemic in the 1960s and 1970s. The participatory model is also useful in analyzing the role of the military in the process of system transformation in many Communist states. At the same time, however, it would be impossible to exclude all the characteristics of the ‘conflict model,’ which placed an emphasis on the Party’s control over the military in most Communist countries. Strictly speaking, it is undeniable that the Party’s political commissars assigned to all levels of military units are actually performing the role of control apparatus, as the ‘conflict model’ describes. However, their roles will vary depending on their assigned positions in the level of the military hierarchy. For example, the Party officials assigned to lower-level military units will tend to wield

their power in such a direct and unsophisticated manner that it would often create frictions between the officials and officers.

Drawing on relevant theories, this paper will proceed in the following manner. First, this paper will examine various aspects of the dynamics of Civil-Military-Party relations under the Kim Jong-Il regime. Then, we will analyze the process by which Kim Jong-Il seized control of the military through his control of the Party; the military's expanding roles and functions; the Party's control and guidance over the military under 'military-first politics' and the growing efforts to promote and reinforce unity among the Party, the military, and civilians. We will then attempt to evaluate the future stability of Kim Jong-Il's regime based on the analysis of dynamics of Civil-Military-Party relations (or, the possibility of the demise of the Party's control over the military, the rationale of the 'civil-military unity' campaign, and the possibility of the transformation of the North Korean system).

II. North Korea's Leadership Structure and the Party, Regime, Citizens, and the People's Army²

1. The Nature and Principles of Leadership

A. The Nature of Leadership

The North Korean system dictates that the Suryong (the leader) will exercise leadership for the success of the revolution and construction. On this point, Kim Jong-Il has said that:

*“The question of leadership in the revolutionary movement and Communist movement is none other than the question of the Suryong’s and the Party’s leadership over the citizen masses. Additionally, the Party of the working class is the revolution’s chief of staff (brain) and the Suryong of the working class is the supreme leader of our revolution.”*³ He further said, *“The Suryong is the supreme leader of the Party, and so the Party’s leadership is the Suryong’s leadership.”*⁴

² Kim Min and Han Bong-seo, “The Leadership System,” in *A Collection of the Great Juche Ideology* (Pyongyang: Social Science Publishers, 1985).

³ Op. cit., p. 18.

Under this logic, the Party's leadership is the same as the Suryong's leadership, because the Suryong is the supreme leader of the Party, which plays the leading and guiding role for the working masses, and as such the Suryong from his supreme position, plays a decisive role in the process of revolution and construction. In other words, the Suryong and the Party will lead the broad masses of the people, including the working class, so that they will become true masters of the historical social movement. The logic is simply that the Party will have to follow the Suryong's leadership if it is to fulfill its roles and missions as the leader of and guide for the working class.

B. The Tenets of Leadership

The North Korean system also dictates that the basic tenets of the Suryong's and the Party's leadership consist mainly of pointing the way for the masses, setting down correct policies and guidelines, and organizing and mobilizing them to carry out those policies and guidelines. In this connection, Kim Jong-Il has said that the tenets of the Suryong's and Party's leadership consisted of "scientifically analyzing the political situation in a timely manner, presenting correct policies and guidelines, as well as strategies and tactics, and organizing and mobilizing the people to carry out the Suryong's policies and guidelines on the basis of the strong blood-ties which exists between them."⁵ In view of these statements, it is clear that the Suryong's leadership, which comprises the development of North Korea's policies, guidelines and strategies, as well as the authority to organize and mobilize the population, represents North Korea's basic command structure.

⁴ "The Korean Workers' Party is a Self-reliant Revolutionary Party, succeeding the Glorious "T/D" Tradition," in Kim and Han, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

C. The Leadership Principle: The Suryong's Unitary Leadership

First and foremost, North Korea advances the principle of the Suryong's 'unitary' or exclusive leadership. Major contents of the principle of unitary leadership will include: First, the Suryong's revolutionary ideology alone shall rule over the entire society and the Party. Second, the Party, the people, and the entire nation shall act as one under the Suryong's orders and instructions, and this principle must be fully and unconditionally carried out without fail. Clearly, these leadership principles are designed for the purpose of justifying the Suryong's ideological dictatorship, a dictatorship over the Party, the People and the Nation.

2. The Party, Regime (Military), and Civilians (Masses) in the Leadership Structure

North Korea says that the Suryong's 'unitary leadership' is carried out through the Proletariat dictatorship. Furthermore, the proletarian dictatorship system consists of the Party, the Government of the working class, and the workers' organizations (or, the masses). Let us now examine these constituent parts of the proletariat dictatorship in detail.

A. The Party of Working Class People

In terms of leadership structure, North Korea defines the Party as the "guiding authority." In fact, Kim Jong-Il said,

*"In the leadership structure, the Party of working class people is the guiding authority for the revolution and construction."*⁶

⁶ "Let's March Forward Raising High the Banner of Marxism-Leninism and Juche Ideology," Ibid., p. 19.

There are two dimensions in the role and status of the Party as the guiding authority. The Party of the working class is the highest organization empowered to uniformly guide all the other organizations of the working class and working masses. The Suryong and the Party of the working class have created a variety of revolutionary organizations, including various youth groups, military units, and popular organizations comprising members of the masses from all sectors and levels. Government agencies are also part of this category ('revolutionary organizations'). Of all the organizations and groups, the Party of the working class is the highest organization in view of its nature and mission, and it occupies the leading position in relation to all other organizations. The Party's status and role include the authority to exercise uniform and overall control over all other organizations, to strengthen and consolidate them firmly around the Suryong, and to provide various principles and directions of action, as well as the goals for struggle and the means of attaining them.

In addition, the Party of the working class is the revolution's chief of staff that commands and organizes all revolutionary and construction projects under its responsibility. In order to carry out revolutionary tasks effectively, it is necessary to have the revolution's chief of staff, which will directly plan and organize the projects aimed at realizing the Suryong's ideas and visions, and which will fully implement the Suryong's ideas and uniformly control and guide the overall revolution and construction under the Suryong's leadership. Therefore, the Party of the working class that has the leadership structure, organization, authority, and competent personnel is the revolution's chief of staff.

B. The Regime (Government) of the Working Class

North Korea says that the Suryong's unitary leadership for the revolution and construction is being realized through the Party and the regime (government) of the working class under the Party's leadership. The government is described as the most comprehensive 'transmission belt' that connects the Party and the masses. In other words, the government is the most comprehensive organization which encompasses and integrates people in all walks of national life within a defined territory and is the 'executive' which will implement the Party's policies and guidelines. The government, through various functional departments, will implement the Party's overall policies and guidelines across all sectors of national life, including the political, economic, cultural and military spheres. The government functions will, for example, include its repressive functions against enemy elements that can harm the people's interests, its control functions to maintain law and order in the country, its functions as the economic organizer, its cultural enlightenment function, its national defense function and external relations function, and the like.

C. The Masses

The 'people's masses' at all levels and in all sectors are organized and educated through the workers' organizations and will become united around the Suryong's 'barricade.' Moreover, the workers' organizations will serve as the 'transmission belt' connecting the Party and the masses and are the 'supporters' and 'rearguards' of the Party. The Party will organize and educate a broad spectrum of the masses in an effort to lead the revolution and construction to victory under the Suryong's leadership, and to coalesce them around the Suryong's barricade.' The workers' organizations as the

Party's outlying structure will have to play the role of rallying the masses around the Suryong's and the Party's 'barricade' by organizing and educating citizens in all walks of national life.

3. The Military in North Korea's Leadership Structure

By 'revolutionary core' North Korea means the central operators who inspire and promote revolutionary struggles purposefully and consciously. North Korea says the masters of revolution and construction are the masses; and the masses also have the power to promote revolution and construction. For these reasons, the masses, by definition, will become the revolutionary core.

However, North Korea further says that the revolutionary core in the 'military-first' era will appear in a more strengthened form. The revolutionary core in the 'military-first' era takes the unified form of the revolutionary high command (Kim Jong-Il), the Party, the military, and the people. In addition, these elements must unite and maintain cohesion around the revolutionary high command. North Korea argues that the revolutionary core has become far stronger since the People's Army joined it as a component. On this point, North Korea has enunciated:

*"Beloved General Kim Jong-Il has further solidified the revolutionary core with the People's Army, and it is powerfully carrying out the great task of self-reliant Socialism based on the unified strength of the Party, the military and the people."*⁷ In particular, North Korea argues that the current military-first era is *"an era in which the revolutionary core is further reinforced and its role unusually higher as the People's Army joined it as the main battle force of revolution."*⁸

⁷ Oh Seong-Gil, "The Lifeline of Military-first Politics and Juche Socialism," (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Publishers, 2003), p. 17.

⁸ Koh Cho-Bong, "The Thesis of Revolution in the Military-First Era,"

In short, the main battle force of revolution devoted to the task of ‘death-defying protection’ of Kim Jong-Il’s ‘revolutionary high command’ is the North Korean armed forces. In order to successfully carry out the mission as a mainstay of revolution, therefore, the North Korean military (army) must become more self-conscious and organize itself under the leadership of the Suryong and the Party. This is precisely the reason why North Korea insists that in the absence of this leadership no revolutionary core of any kind can be built. Given this posture, it is clear that North Korea is trying to build up its armed forces as the ‘death-defying protection force for Kim Jong-Il,’ who concurrently represents the Suryong and the Party and as the force “armed to the teeth with the death-defying spirit to protect the Suryong (Kim Jong-Il) as its own leader and own Suryong.”⁹

(Pyongyang: Pyongyang Publishers), p. 31.

⁹ The Social Science Academy, Institute of Philosophy Studies, “The Philosophy of Our Party’s Gun-barrel Philosophy,” (Pyongyang; Social Science Publishers, 2003), pp. 54-66.

III. The State of Civil-Military-Party Relations under the Kim Jong-II Regime

1. Expanding the Military's Roles and Functions: Military-first Politics

A. Promoting Military-first Politics: Concepts and Major Elements

North Korea explains her 'military-first politics' in terms of "politics that regards the military as crucially important and places priority emphasis on its reinforcement." It further says,

*"Exerting maximum efforts to build a strong People's Army and forcefully promoting all the projects of revolution and construction relying on military power is Comrade Kim Jong-II's unique political method."*¹⁰

¹⁰ Koh Sang-Jin, "The Basic Characteristics of Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong-II's Military-First Politics," *Philosophical Studies*, Jan. 1999, pp. 17-18.

“Political method” is a phrase that North Korea uses to indicate “every conceivable ways and means” for the realization of its political ideology. North Korea insists:

“Depending on how the question of ‘political method’ is solved (determined), fundamentally different outcome will develop in terms of power and stability of political authority and political system. And, this crucial question, which was left unsolved in the history of Socialist politics, has been brilliantly solved by our Party’s military-first politics method.” At the same time, North Korea insists, *“The military-first politics is a leadership style (method), which encourages the military to take the lead in solving all the problems found in the process of revolution and construction, and which seeks to promote all Socialist tasks with armed forces as the pillar of revolution.”*

Furthermore, North Korea says:

“Since strengthening the revolutionary armed forces will not only guarantee a self-reliant posture for the masses but also enhance the masses’ creative roles to the maximum, military-first politics is the most powerful and ideal political method of our time.”¹¹

To summarize the above definition, the essence of military-first politics consists of three elements: Placing emphasis on the military, building up the military, and following the lead of the armed forces as the pillar of revolution. In relation to the necessity for the first two elements, the North Korean authorities have explained thus;

“(General) Kim Jong-Il has trenchantly analyzed the cyclical history of the rise and fall of states in human history, and based on his conclusions drawn from the lessons of political history, which used to teach the principle of ‘economy-first, military-next’ politics, and

¹¹ *Korean Central Broadcast*, July 22, 1999.

the lessons of international Communist movement of the 1890s, which failed to achieve Socialism because it neglected the importance of military power, he has finally come up with the method of military-first politics.”

Clearly, this argument is meant to justify the necessity of a “military-first, economy-second” political method.

At the heart of this argument is a belief that an economy-first policy, which de-emphasizes the military, could possibly allow the nation to overcome impending economic hardship but it would never guarantee the security of the regime.¹² However, the reason North Korea has been emphasizing the necessity for a ‘military-first, political economy-second’ method is largely to distance the leadership from the responsibilities of economic hardship, especially in terms of Kim Jong-Il’s personal responsibility. In fact, it is more likely that North Korea is emphasizing military-first politics, stressing the military’s role as the pillar of revolution, out of necessity to protect and safeguard the regime. The underlying intentions, apparently, are to transform

¹² North Korea criticizes the economy-first developmental strategy as follows: “Under the previous revolutionary theory of working class, the emphasis was on the ideas and theories concerning the construction of Socialism based on materialistic economic aspects. As a result, the emphasis in tackling the practical problems of Socialist construction was placed on the economy rather than the military, and on the workers and peasants rather than the soldiers. These flaws are related to the historical and theoretical limitations. First, the founding fathers of Marxism-Leninism could not have known the importance of the military since they did not personally experience the construction of Socialism. Second, these issues could not be raised in terms of the theories and methodologies they were developing at the time...Of course, the importance of economic construction is significant in the construction of Socialism, also. But, the destiny of Socialism, the Socialist Party in power and the Socialist regime, as well as Socialist systems can only be safeguarded by the barrel of a gun...” See, Lee Cheol, *op. cit.*, above, p. 118.

the Kim Il-Sung's military into Kim Jong-Il's own military so that he, Kim Jong-Il, can actively utilize it for the purpose of solidifying his regime. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Party newspaper, Rodong Shinmun, in its editorial (commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Army) stressed,

*"We should develop and strengthen our People's Army permanently as Comrade Kim Jong-Il's Army."*¹³

In an effort to realize this goal, North Korea has been gradually enhancing the military's role and transforming the military-first ideology into a theory of revolution by replacing the military for the working class as the mainstay of revolution. This clearly is an attempt to justify the military's leading role in all sectors of North Korean society in the name of revolution.

In the past, North Korea used to designate workers and peasants, even intellectuals, as the mainstay of revolution, and it has never previously included the military among them. Today, however, North Korea says it will no longer uphold a revolutionary outlook solely based on the working class. For example, the Kim Il-Sung University Campus Newspaper (Economic Philosophy, 2003, No. 2) pronounced:

"To argue that the working class should become the mainstay of revolution at any time and at any place is logically incorrect and is a dogmatic viewpoint of defunct theories. So, our Party absolutely opposes all dogmatic approaches of defunct theories and all revisionist distortions."

The editorial further said:

¹³ *The Rodong Shinmun*, Apr. 25, 2002.

“The People’s Army is the nucleus leading our Socialist development and a model from which the entire society must learn from.”

This statement is clearly trying to justify ‘military-first, worker-second’ politics. Since ‘military-first, worker-second’ politics will mean the emergence of the military as the mainstay of the revolution, it would be safe to characterize today’s North Korean regime as a ‘military-first revolutionary regime.’

B. Military-first Politics and the Military’s Rising Stature

The ‘military stature’ here does not imply the power political status of the military but indicates the level of its relative importance over other sectors. Under military-first politics, the military is foremost and it is the core force and mainstay of the revolution, and so its reinforcement is essential. The ‘military is foremost’ means that everybody should adopt the viewpoint and position that all other projects should be subservient to the military. This, in turn, means that the military, which is in charge of military affairs, is higher in importance than other sectors. Indeed, the status of the military is enhanced as the mainstay of the revolution. The importance of the military’s priority status has been well demonstrated by the fact that Kim Jong-II has been concentrating his official activities on the military. In fact, Kim Jong-II has been paying more attention to the military after the death of Kim Il-Sung by focusing his official activities on military-related matters as shown below:

- 1996: Kim Jong-II attended a total of 43 official functions (as of Nov. 24, 1996); Included among them were 14 military functions and 17 on-site guided trips to military units.
- 2004: Kim Jong-II’s military-related activities totaled 53 out of

92 public appearances (68%).

- 2006: (As of June 30, 2006) Chairman Kim Jong-Il took part in 66 public events, 44 of which were inspection tours of military units.

The increasing importance of the North Korean Army is also noticeable when we look at the enhanced hierarchy of military leaders. In fact, the military's rising status is a reflection of the impact of these military-first politics. Since the official power succession, Kim Jong-Il has been incrementally enhancing the military's power hierarchy.

- The Commander of the Protective Force Lee Eul-sol, General Director of Political Affairs Cho Myong-rok, Army Chief of Staff Kim Young-choon, and Social Safety Minister Paik Hak-rim previously stood at No. 77, 89, 88 and 53 in the political hierarchy, respectively, according to the funeral committee roster in July 1994. However, during the second commemorative ceremony for Kim Il-Sung in July 1996, they have advanced to positions No. 11, 12, 13, and 30, respectively.
- In the funeral committee roster for the late General Choi Kwang, Generals Lee Eul-sol, Cho Myong-Rok, and Kim Young-Choon have advanced to the No. 6, 7, and 8 spots while Paik Hak-Rim took the No. 24 spot, moving up to the forefront of power.
- According to the roster released on the occasion of the 55th founding ceremony of Korean Workers Party, Oct. 10, 2000, a total of six members of the National Defense Commission (NDC), including Kim Jong-Il, who is No. 1 in the hierarchy, were among the top ten leaders of the Jusok Group (top political leaders).
- If Cho Myong-Rok (on a U.S. visit at the time), who was No. 3, were included, most of the top ten spots in the 'Jusok Group'

- would be filled with the members of the NDC.
- In addition, the major military leaders (four-star generals) have moved up to relatively upper levels of the roster in most official functions.

The military leaders' advances in the political hierarchy do not, however, necessarily mean a power concentration or power shift to the North Korean military. It simply reflects a nominal status enhancement for the military, not a sign of real empowerment.

C. The Reality of the Party-Military Relationship

The military-first politics is a method of utilizing the military as Kim Jong-II's and the Party's tool for the maintenance of stable political power. It is a device designed to buttress Kim Jong-II's legitimacy and military charisma by stressing his military leadership and to inspire the military's loyalty. It is also intended to seize complete control of the military. By spreading the 'revolutionary military spirit' of the People's Army throughout the whole of society, it seeks to protect the regime, which is trying to break out of the 'hardship march' and the 'forced march' and to move toward a self-reliant economic rehabilitation. In foreign relations, military-first politics seeks to enhance North Korea's negotiating positions on the basis of military power and to protect the regime by blocking off foreign political interventions.

Kim Jong-II has argued:

“As long as we maintain our People’s Army strong, we can reorganize the Party even if it were to collapse, but if the military were weak, we would be unable to safeguard the bounties of revolution and unable to maintain the Party. In this sense, the military is the Party and the State, as well as the people.”¹⁴

These words are not meant to set down a vertical relationship but to indicate a horizontal relationship between the Party and the military. In other words, Kim Jong-Il is stressing the imperative of strengthening and developing the military on a priority basis, because only with a strong military can the Party, the State and the people expect to survive and prosper.

Again, this does not imply that the military is vertically higher than, or dominant over, the Party. It is clear that there is absolutely no change in the ‘Party-commands-the-military’ structure in which the Party will guide and control the military politically and ideologically. In this connection, Kim Jong-Il has issued instructions:

“The more complicated the situation and the heavier the mission of the People’s Army, we must firmly adhere to the ‘Party-commands-the-military’ structure.”

A North Korean textbook paraphrases these instructions as follows, *“The ‘Party-commands-the-military’ structure means that the Party will guarantee unitary leadership and ideology for the People’s Army and ensure that the entire military will move as one under the command of Dear Supreme Commander Comrade Kim Jong-Il.”*¹⁵

As these examples show, it is evident that there is absolutely no change in the Party’s leadership position over the military and its role as the ‘revolution’s chief of staff.’ Kim Jong-Il has said:

“If we were to pursue and accomplish the great task of Socialism, we should strengthen the Party, and the Party must maintain a firm grip on gun barrels.”

This is the so-called “gun-barrel philosophy” of Kim Jong-Il.¹⁶

¹⁴ Lee Cheol, op. cit., above, p. 11.

¹⁵ *Study Reference Materials* (For military use), (Pyongyang: The People’s Army Publishers, 2001), p. 17.

2. Efforts to Strengthen the Civil-Military-Party Unity

A. Internalizing Common Leadership Values in the Party and Military

Since the onset of the Kim Jong-Il era, North Korea has adopted a ‘military-centered’ ideology as the Party’s central ideology. North Korea claims that its military-centered ideology derives from its revolutionary principle; to wit, ‘*Power comes from the barrel of a gun and is maintained by the gun barrel.*’ According to this logic, revolutionaries must always maintain a firm grip on the barrel of the gun in order to achieve Socialism and a Socialist regime, and to crush the ‘violent reactions’ of the ‘exploiting class’ with ‘revolutionary force.’ North Korea further argues that because North Koreans have tenaciously upheld their gun-barrel-based policies they were able to achieve a glorious victory in the Korean War. Consequently, the task of strengthening the revolutionary army, and enhancing its role, is always a fundamental task in the revolutionary struggle to achieve the great task of Socialism and the self-reliance of the masses. Additionally, the military-centered ideology is the very source of light for the unique status and role of the revolutionary army in the revolutionary struggle of the working class. This ideology will also justify the logic that the military is the pillar and mainstay of the revolution in attaining the great task of Socialism.

North Koreans argue that the founding fathers of Marxism-Leninism have shown that the ‘revolutionary force’ (or, the military) has played a crucial role in safeguarding the victorious revolution and it has successfully toppled Capitalist rules and seized

¹⁶ As for Kim Jong-Il’s “gun-barrel philosophy,” see The Social Science Academy, Institute of Philosophy Research, *The Philosophy of Our Party*, op. cit., above.

political power for the working class. In short, the ‘revolutionary force’ is the weapon of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’ According to this argument, the North Korean armed forces are not ‘politically neutral’ forces whose mission is simply to protect the territory and people from external aggressive forces. The Socialist countries in Eastern Europe collapsed because they (1) failed to understand the military’s leading role, (2) completely disarmed the military, politically and ideologically, (3) weakened the armed forces by one-sided arms reductions, and (4) privatized military industries. North Korea argues that these were the reasons for the collapse of the Party, the working class, and the Socialist system itself. In short, only the barrel of a gun (the military) can ensure the survival of the Party, the people, and the Socialist system. The North Korean argument that ‘the military is the Party, the State, and the people’ means that the military’s destiny is inseparable from the Party’s and the People’s destiny. On the basis of this logic, the North Korean authorities insist that the Party, the military, and the people will be able to move as one only when the military and Party of the working class achieve unity. This is why the unity of the Party-military-people is imperative. This unity will require the unity of the military and the people under the Party’s ‘leadership.’ North Korea’s strategy clearly is to reinforce political and ideological power under a solid unity of the military and the people around the ‘barricade’ of the Suryong and the Party.¹⁷ Therefore, the North Korean authorities have been continuously and repeatedly reinforcing political and ideological education within the senior ranks of the Party and military so that they may jointly share these ‘leadership values.’ As a result, these values have been ‘internalized’ to a considerable extent, so much so that Party and military leaders will now share common values

¹⁷ Lee Cheol, *op. cit.*, above, pp. 4-12.

regarding such issues as the imperatives of domestic order and stability, the unity as a nation-state, and a strong defense posture against all external threats.¹⁸

B. The Campaign for Civil-Military Unity

From the early 1990s North Korea has been actively conducting a civil-military unity campaign to solidify the foundation for a stable rule. Soon after Kim Jong-Il was nominated as the supreme military commander at the Party's 6th Central Committee meeting (19th Plenary Session on Dec. 24, 1991), North Korea has launched a massive civil-military unity campaign, providing various consumer goods and supplies for the soldiers living in the barracks in civilian districts to boost their cooperative morale when dispatched to work at various construction sites and engaged in other missions in and around the neighboring towns and villages. On this point, Kim Il-Sung had also stressed the importance of the civil-military unity campaign, saying:

“We must pay a Party-wide and population-wide interest in the quality of life of People’s Army soldiers. We must support the People’s Army by all means and the citizens should love and actively help our soldiers like brothers, so that they could better carry out their military duties in the future.”¹⁹

As part of this civil-military unity campaign, North Korea has encouraged all factories, enterprises, cooperative farms, and all

¹⁸ Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), “The Reality of Internalization of Juche Ideology,” (Seoul: KINU, 1994); Also see, KINU, “An Evaluation of Crisis Levels of the North Korean Socialist System and Prospects for Endurance,” (Seoul: KINU, 1996).

¹⁹ Kie Byeong-In, “The Military and the People Are Of One Mind,” *The Rodong Shinmun*, May 16, 1990, Recitation.

levels of schools to host lectures, seminars, and education study meetings designed to express thanks to the People's Army under the guidance of local Party organizations. In addition, the government has also encouraged a wide dissemination of various propaganda leaflets and billboards depicting the need for 'hearty support of the soldiers' and the promotion of a 'culture of civil-military unity.' Furthermore, the authorities have directed all cooperative farm workers around military compounds to provide various 'labor contributions' in preparing 'side dishes' for the soldiers in an effort to promote a sense of unity between the workers and soldiers. The Rodong Shinmun has also editorially commented that,²⁰ "the current situation demands that the military and citizens to unite into one," emphasizing that a culture of mutual cooperation was essential. The editorial further said:

*"The traditional culture of civil-military unity is fully blooming everyday not only in the guard-posts along the nation's defense lines but also in the Socialist construction sites where monumental structures for future generations are being built."*²¹

On March 18, 1992, the Central People's Committee adopted a proclamation on "the designation of model cities and counties for civil-military unity." The following is a summary of the government order:

"The North Korean people have always cared for the People's Army soldiers like their sons, daughters and next of kin, and this beautiful custom of helping them from the bottom of their hearts continues on. The fostering of this traditional culture will further strengthen the blood ties between the people and soldiers, laying the cornerstone

²⁰ *The Rodong Shinmun*, Apr. 23-24, 1981.

²¹ Dong Se-Yoon, "The Military and the People are One Family," *The Rodong Shinmun*, May 14, 1990.

*for the self-reliance of North Korea, and the promotion of this culture is one of the important projects for the completion of our people-centered self-reliant revolutionary task... In order to nationally commend the cities and counties that qualify as outstanding models for this project and to encourage the promotion of civil-military unity the Central People's Committee has decided to promulgate the title of 'model civil-military district,' and hereby approve the legal authority pertaining to the awarding of this title."*²²

In fact, on July 1, 1993, North Korea's Central People's Committee awarded the 'model civil-military unity' award to eight districts, including the Mankyungdae District of Pyongyang,²³ for their pace-setting promotion of civil-military unity.²⁴ North Korea's radio broadcast has also praised various activities for civil-military unity, commenting thus;

"Under the leadership of Great General Kim Jong-Il the beautiful tradition of civil-military unity is actively promoted... In the course of past one year, the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army Comrade Kim Jong-Il has expressed his personal appreciations to some 1,100 towns and entities for their promotion of civil-military unity, including numerous workers and soldiers... He has also conferred the title of 'model civil-military unity' to 15 cities and counties."²⁵ As a result, our revolutionary self-reliance has been reinforced in every respect on the strength of civil-military unity and

²² *Korean Central Broadcast*, Mar. 24, 1992.

²³ The cities and counties are: The Mankyungdae District, Pyongyang; Daecheon City, South Pyong-an Province; Taecheon County, North Pyong-an Province; Seong-gan County, Jakang Province; Baecheon County, South Hwanghae Province; Hweryong City, North Hamkyung Province; Kapsan County, Yangkang Province; and Kangseo District, Nampo City.

²⁴ Ministry of Unification, "Monthly North Korean Trends," (March 1992), pp. 25-27.

²⁵ *Korean Central Broadcast*, Apr. 5, 1994.

the nation's defense is strong with steel armor... The combined forces of our Party and military have courageously crushed the brutal challenges of imperialist coalition forces and international reactionaries and honorably protected and advanced the great task of Socialism... This proud achievement is the brilliant outcome of the wise leadership of Supreme Commander Comrade Kim Jong-Il who has enriched the idea of self-reliant civil-military unity, correctly applied it for the realization of revolution, and highly enhanced the dignity of our fatherland and people.”²⁶

Obviously, the upshot of this civil-military unity campaign is to minimize the soldiers' grudges regarding the deteriorating quality of barracks life under the ongoing economic hardships and to enhance the soldiers' morale by increasing the levels of civilian assistance to the People's Army throughout the nation.

²⁶ *Radio Pyongyang*, Apr. 5, 1994.

IV. Evaluating the Stability of Kim Jong-II's Regime based on Civil-Military-Party Relations

1. The Party's Chance of Losing Control over the Military

The military, if allowed to form itself into an independent force, has the potential of posing a threat to the Party's policy-making authority. Therefore, North Korea has been promoting a strategy of Party-military unity through on-going political and ideological training programs and by including the military in the Party's various political and ideological projects, while partially acknowledging the uniqueness of the military. So far, North Korea's Party-military relations have shown characteristics of both the 'control model' and 'participatory model,' the former placing emphasis on aspects of conflict and the latter on the harmony between the two. In other words, North Korea has been maintaining its regime stability through a Party-military unity by striking a delicate balance between the two. The Party was given the supervisory and surveillance functions over the military and the military was allowed to develop into a political army, voluntarily

participating in various Party projects and implementing Party policies in a lead position.

Given this situation, however, we may pose the question: Under what circumstances can a fissure or transformation occur in this Party-military unity? John W. R. Lepingwell, in his study of the Soviet military during the period of ‘perestroika,’ observed that the Party’s control mechanism over the military began to crumble for four major reasons: (1) threats to the military’s independence in the process of security-policy decision-making, (2) serious challenges to the military core values concerning national cohesion and safety, (3) growing politicization of the military, and (4) the demise of legitimacy and authority of the civilian government.²⁷ In this chapter, we will analyze various aspects of this issue to see if this type of development is possible in North Korea under the Kim Jong-Il system, and attempt to make an assessment of the stability of Kim Jong-Il’s regime, which is seeking the goal of ‘system maintenance’ through a Party-military unity.

A. The Pursuit of Security through ‘Military-First’ Politics

Given the banner of military-first politics, North Korea’s security policy decisions will probably lean toward placing more policy priority on the military. The military, for its part, will try to actively participate in Kim Jong-Il’s policymaking process and support his policies ahead of other competing sectors. Even if North Korea were to pursue economic policies of openness and reform, it would have to try to keep them within the ‘security-first, economy-second’ framework, instead of following market economic logic and efficiency. Therefore, unlike the cases of China and the former Soviet Union, North Korea’s policies would have to be

²⁷ Lepingwell, “Soviet Civil-Military Relations and the August Coup,” *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (July 1992), p. 550.

implemented within the limits set by the military under the banner of military-first politics.

Institutionally, the North Korean authorities are likely to opt for the policies designed to expand the roles and functions of the military. The incumbent members on the National Defense Commission are mostly military leaders, which means that these military leaders will rely on ‘military logic’ in policy discussions and they are likely to have a significant impact on all policy decisions. Consequently, major security policies, including nuclear and missile issues, as well as inter-Korean military dialog, which are directly related to military values, will probably be decided in favor of the logic and interest of the military. This will also mean that the independence of the military is being enhanced rather than abridged.

B. Military Core Values (Political Stability and National Cohesion): Strengthening the Regime Stability through Civil-Military Unity

The North Korean military is not an organization devoted solely to national defense. It is being built as a revolutionary political army dedicated to boundless loyalty to the Suryong and the Party and imbued with a spirit of uncompromising struggle against and hatred of enemies. The ‘enemies’ here mean the regime’s enemies, i.e., the internal and external forces which pose a threat to the Suryong Kim Jong-II. Even though their original mission is national defense, the North Korean Armed forces’ roles and functions are more important, in practical terms, as a means of militarily protecting and safeguarding the person of Kim Jong-II as Chairman of National Defense Commission, as well as the Kim Jong-II regime.

Therefore, so long as there is no change in the Suryong’s and Party’s unitary power structure, the Party’s political and ideological

controls over the military will likely continue and the uniform value of the Party and the military namely, ‘death-defying protection of the Suryong,’ will persist unabated. Should any social disturbance challenging the Suryong-Party unitary power structure to develop, the North Korean military would automatically get involved to restore law and order for the Suryong and the Party. Since the objective of this type of military involvement is to protect the Suryong and the Party at their command, such military actions could hardly turn against the Suryong and the Party into an anti-regime revolt. In short, as soon as the situation is over, the military will return to its previous mission and resume its posture as a group most loyal to the Suryong and the Party.

C. The Politicization of the People’s Army: Suppressing anti-Party (anti-Suryong) ‘Politicization’

What we are concerned with here is the ‘politicization’ of the People’s Army, which is a power group that could potentially pose a threat to the stability of Kim Jong-Il’s regime. We are talking about a new type of ‘politicization,’ which is quite different from the ‘politicization’ the Workers’ Party has been seeking to promote so far. If, for example, democratic politics were to develop in North Korea and if the People’s Armed Forces were to participate directly or indirectly in the political process, would the North Korean army be able to freely participate in the political process, assuming that the Workers’ Party and the People’s Assembly were also allowed to engage in political activities?

The Party’s Political Bureau and the Secretariat are actual departments that decide Party’s policies and guidelines in North Korea. Military leaders participate in these departments as full or alternate members. Therefore, they actually participate in the political decision-making process. If such direct military participa-

tion in the Party business were to increase, political roles of the military within the Party would also increase, and an independent political force could develop and pose a threat to the Party's unitary power structure. In an effort to preclude such an event, Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, as soon as their power-base was stabilized, have tried to restrict direct political participation of the military in the Party's Political Bureau and Secretariat.

In an effort to solidify his power base, Kim Jong-Il is likely to reinforce the Party's political and ideological control over the military through the Party's control apparatus built into the military structure, even as he continues to extend nominal priority treatment to the military. Just as Kim Il-Sung secured the support of the military by expanding the military's political participation when he was trying to consolidate his political power, Kim Jong-Il will also try to continually develop the military's allegiance and support by enhancing the roles and status of the military under the banner of military-first politics.

D. The Regime's Legitimacy and Authority: From Status Quo to a Decline

North Korea has introduced the concept of 'new revolution,' namely, the 'military-first revolution.' Having designated the 'anti-imperialist (American) military front' as the frontline of the new revolution, North Korea has brought up the military as the revolution's main battle force, emphasizing the importance of 'General' Kim Jong-Il as the supreme leader and military commander of military-first politics. The last element, of course, is intended to enhance the stature and legitimacy of Kim Jong-Il's power. In any case, North Korea, through military-first politics, seems to be having some success in imparting the image of Kim Jong-Il as a leader in the minds of the North Korean people. This

also means that his power-base is gradually being solidified.

The problem, however, is that in order for Kim Jong-Il to maintain his status and legitimacy as the supreme leader through his 'military-first politics,' he needs to repeatedly create 'external revolutionary fronts,' or constant foreign threats. Since the North Korean nuclear issue is something that will not be resolved in short order, this issue is likely to serve North Korea's need to maintain its 'anti-imperialist military front.' Therefore, so long as North Korea's 'anti-imperialist military front' remains valid, there is little possibility that Kim Jong-Il's authority and his legitimacy, based on 'military-first politics,' will suffer any significant setback.

However, what if Kim Jong-Il attempts to perpetuate his military-first politics, while the North Korean economy further deteriorates? Could he still maintain his authority and legitimacy? Just as he did during his 'first round' of nuclear negotiations (in the 1990s), he could still agree for a nuclear 'settlement' with the United States in a friendly gesture and garner handsome economic profits from foreign sources, including the United States. However, given the unflagging US policy position on the nuclear issue (renunciation first, negotiations later), it would be difficult to expect a fundamental resolution of the issue at this point. Even if a direct dialogue channel were established and negotiations proceeded, it would be difficult for North Korea to expect a satisfactory result as happened in the earlier round of negotiations, unless North Korea decided to give up its nuclear aspirations altogether. So long as North Korea refuses to renounce her nuclear options, US pressure to place sanctions on North Korea will undoubtedly increase, and the North Korean economy would certainly turn for the worse. Although North Korea could take advantage of the current developments for the purpose of promoting military-first politics at home, it would be hard put to placate the complaints of the North Korean people regarding the deepening economic difficulties.

Additionally, the rising level of public discontent would certainly dull the edges of the Party's control capabilities, and the regime could face an increasing instability.

North Korea has already experienced a weakening of Party leadership during the period of economic hardship in the 1990s. For the North Korean people, the food shortages were the most pressing issue, regardless of the political slogans and Party activities. As a consequence, the Party's abilities to exercise control over the people suffered a significant setback. The collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European regimes persuaded many North Koreans that the Suryong's and Party's Juche Ideology was a relic of a bygone era. Up to this juncture, the Juche Ideology and Party guidelines were at the highest level of authority, and the military, though powerful, was below that level. In the 1990s, the Party guidelines and the Juche Ideology, which was the Party's leading ideology, were so badly damaged that many believed them to be almost totally worthless. North Korea maintains Party cells even down to the lowest administrative units. Additionally, when Party secretaries went to conduct on-site 'guidance' in those days the local inhabitants would greet them with protests such as, "we studied the Juche Ideology very hard for 50 years. Now, just give us something to eat." Accordingly, the Party proved to be increasingly ineffective, and during this period, the people's trust in the Party deteriorated rapidly.²⁸

Given these domestic circumstances, Kim Jong-Il has had to develop a ruling structure relying on the military, rather than on the Party. When the Party's leadership failed to work on the people, Kim Jong-Il began to mobilize and rely on the military, arguing, "power came out of the barrel of a gun." Many North Korean defectors have testified that in the late 1990s there were no law

²⁸ Testimonies of North Korean Defectors "A" and "B."

and order in the provinces, and robberies and rapes were rampant. As a result, many parts of North Korea were in effect placed under what was almost martial law, and armed soldiers had to enter the farming cooperatives and factories to supervise cultivation and manage the workers. This situation contributed to a gradual enhancement of the role of the military, and other agencies, including the Party and the Foreign Ministry, were forced to begin thinking and acting like the military, thus contributing to the appearance of ‘military-first’ politics. However, when the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces began to investigate the Party’s Organization and Guidance Department and remove high-ranking Party officials, Kim Jong-Il realized that he had given too much power to the military. He soon began to shift his power back over to the Party, while trimming the military power. Hence, we can see here evidence of a period of adjustment.²⁹

In short, if Kim Jong-Il were to mishandle the nuclear issue and force the nation into a situation in which he had to ask the North Korean population to undergo another period like that of the ‘hardship march,’ his authority and legitimacy would most likely suffer a serious setback.

2. The Kim Jong-Il Regime in light of Civil-Military Relations: The Increasing Possibility of Collapse amid Stability

Since Kim Jong-Il began to rule North Korea through the military, the North Korean army collectively has become an organization that is running the entire country above and beyond its original political/military mission. As the military’s role expanded into the field of political, economic, and social control, the soldiers’ contact

²⁹ Ibid.

with the general population was bound to increase. This development has necessitated a re-definition of civil-military relations in North Korea. This is why Kim Jong-Il has begun to stress the importance of the civil-military unity campaign. Since both the military and civilians were asked to render support to each other at a time when the survival of each was uncertain, there was a strong possibility that the 'unity campaign' could, ironically, backfire and exacerbate the tensions inherent within civil-military relations. Rather than promote harmony between the two, the campaign could even magnify the frictions between them.

The North Korean authorities have been trying to increase and reinforce the 'synergy effect' from the civil-military unity campaign. However, the emphasis on military-first politics was causing more incidents of misdemeanors among the 'bragging soldiers,' and the latter contributed to increases in the negative images of the military among the general population, exacerbating the tensions within civil-military relations.

Currently, North Korea is pursuing order and stability by dint of the logic of military-first politics. Unlike the Kim Il-Sung era, the military is playing a leading role in North Korean society today. Additionally, sitting at the helm is Kim Jong-Il's in his position as leader. Therefore, if the military were perceived not as pace-setters and models for other the other sectors of the society, but as a means of regimentation for the maintenance of law and order, harming the welfare and property of citizens, it would be a serious detriment and would even pose a direct threat to the legitimacy of Kim Jong-Il's leadership. Furthermore, such a development would seriously unsettle the foundation of the Workers'Party (KWP), which was supposed to exercise control over the entire society on the basis of military-centered ideological projects (or, military-first politics).

This is why North Korea is actively promoting the civil-military

unity campaign, in which the military will protect the masses and the citizens will support the military. However, the reality is that most North Koreans are scared of the soldiers when they appear, but they will swear at them as soon as they leave. On the other hand, the soldiers tend to display arrogance and disdain toward civilians. It is arguably this friction which will create a vicious cycle, contributing to a deterioration of the civil-military relationship. The civilian grudges against the military could in time develop into mounting discontent among the population, which in turn could lead to the regime's instability. A chain reaction could develop along the following line: Citizens' distrust of the military → Denial of military-first politics → Collapse of Kim Jong-Il's leadership. The possibility of this series of events occurring is high, particularly if economic hardships are exacerbated in North Korea.

V. Conclusion

Clearly, Kim Jong-Il's North Korea, which is run under the banner of military-first politics, displays all the characteristics of a 'garrison state'³⁰ that Professor Harold Lasswell has talked about. However, Lasswell's garrison state model was a discussion about a non-Socialist state, rather than a Socialist state like North Korea, which is run centered on the Chairman of the National Defense Commission. Therefore, there are differences, but there are a great many similarities, also, at least on initial impressions.

First, North Korea is constantly reiterating that the nation is facing a situation akin to war, and asking its people to brace for war. The North Korean authorities tell the people that the "American imperialists are plotting to start a war on the Korean Peninsula over the 'nuclear issue' and the plot has reached its final stages."³¹ In order to frustrate this plot, they insist that North

³⁰ Lasswell, Harold D., "The Garrison State," *American Journal of Sociology*, 44, pp. 455-468.

Koreans must reinforce their ‘anti-imperialist military front.’

Second, North Korea is investing, on a priority basis, all available national resources in fulfilling the demands of military reinforcement. Given the imperatives of military-first politics, the regime is constantly stressing,

“Every social unit must firmly believe that we can survive without sweets but we cannot survive without bullets, and must maintain a revolutionary principle that all projects must be placed subservient to military projects, and that we must guarantee the priority production of national defense requirements.”³²

Third, the entire North Korean society is becoming militarized. The military-first politics demands that all sectors of society must take after the military as a model and learn from it. For this reason, ‘learning from the military’ is a prevailing trend all over North Korea. As a result, the entire North Korean society is imbued with a militaristic way of thinking, and personal behavior and daily lifestyles are becoming ‘militarized,’ as well.

Fourth, in addition to its original mission of national defense, the North Korean military has also assumed the mission of maintaining law and order in the society and security for all social organizations.

However, North Korea does not seem to display one particular aspect of the typical garrison state. In a garrison state, the military will gradually take over the national decision-making process at the highest levels, but this is not the case in North Korea, at least not yet. North Korean authorities explain the position thus;

³¹ Kim Bong-Ho, “The Great Era of Military-first Politics,” p. 116.

³² The Social Science Publishers, “Our Party’s Gun-barrel Philosophy,” p. 97.

“The military-first politics does not mean that all national structures will adopt military systems. It simply means that military affairs will be given priority in national affairs. It is a political system in which more authority is granted the military, so that the military sector could achieve its highest level of competence.”³³

Therefore, we can safely surmise that the NDC Chairman-centered North Korean system is clearly distinguishable from the ‘militarized’ garrison state in which the military leadership exclusively takes charge of the entire national decision-making process. Even though the competence and authority of the NDC have been enhanced under the Kim Jong-Il political system, it should be understood that it was a move designed to justify Kim Jong-Il’s supreme competence and decision-making authority, rather than an attempt to empower individual NDC commissioners (who are mostly military leaders). In fact, the military leaders sitting on the NDC do not seem to actively participate in the national decision-making process, except for Kim Jong-Il himself.

Moreover, these military leaders do not even seem to actively participate in policy decision-making, except for strictly military matters. In addition, the participation of military leaders in military decision-making processes should be seen as a normal and routine state of affairs. For example, the military-related agencies will participate, along with the Foreign Ministry, in the decision-making process concerning North Korea’s US policy and the nuclear issue. In short, the decision to enhance the military’s status and roles under military-first politics was intended to enhance the military’s political role in connection with the ‘death-defying protection of the Suryong.’ Military leaders will get nominal recognition and promotions, but it does not mean an empowerment of a military clique, which can exercise exclusive power in the national (or the

³³ Kim Bong-Ho, *op. cit.*, above, p. 79.

Party) decision-making process.

The Party-military relations under Kim Jong-Il's military-first politics do not show any fundamental change from the Kim Il-Sung era. In other words, the relations between the two sectors should be seen as a matter of 'before-or-after' on a horizontal plane, rather than as a vertical relationship. In short, the prevailing logic under military-first politics is not that 'the Party must exist for the military to function,' (as in the Kim Il-Sung era) but that 'the military must exist for the Party to function.' Therefore, the North Korean authorities insist that the nation must prioritize its efforts for the purposes of military reinforcement, and that everything must be placed subservient to the military. To reinforce the military does not mean to grant more political power to the military. It simply means to increase the military capabilities or military might. Strengthening military capabilities also means a further development of the defense industries to enhance the military's fighting capabilities as well as its political and ideological posture. Since the military's political and ideological posture can only be reinforced through the Party's political and ideological education and guidance, the Party clearly remains in a position to lead the military.

In this context, it is clear that Party-dominant political characteristics are still maintained in North Korea even under military-first politics. Given the North Korean political system, in which 'the Party is the Suryong and the Suryong is the Party,' any change in the Party-military relationship will mean the denial of the Suryong, i.e., the Party's Unitary Dictatorship System. Denial of the Suryong, hence the Party, would be absolutely unacceptable even under the military-first political system.

The North Korean Workers' Party (KWP) has adopted a political system of a Socialist Communist State, and all major political groups are organized and consolidated under the Party structure,

except for the workers, peasants, young people, and the armed forces. Moreover, all these groups are represented in the decision-making bodies, like the Party Central Committee or Political Bureau. The military elite will also work as the Party elite, making them dual elites. This is clear from the fact that most North Korean military officers are Party members. This means that in North Korea, the Party and the military are not separate groups possessing divergent goals and values. Their institutional relationship may be described as “the Party is whole, the military is a part.” North Korea describes harmony between the whole and the part in terms of a ‘relationship of unity.’ The unity between the two also means that the Suryong and the military will form a united entity. Consequently, the enhancement of the military’s roles under military-first politics means that the military as the mainstay of revolution will assume the role of a vanguard in the revolutionary political struggles (death-defying protection of the Suryong). This is why the North Korean authorities insist upon unity, saying, “the military is the Party and the Party is the military.”

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that military-first politics is contributing to the promotion of ‘unity’ or a mutually complimentary relationship, rather than friction between the Party and the military. This relationship of ‘Party-military unity’ will also justify the Party’s decision to mobilize the military, if necessary, to protect the safety of the Suryong and Party structures. The military will also consider active participation, under the Party’s direction, in suppressing any civil disturbances, as an act of allegiance to the Suryong and the Party. This type of ‘Party-military unity’ structure will make the following series of events very difficult: A progressive political deployment of armed forces → Increases in military involvement in ‘anti-Party’ political activities → Military coup d’etat challenging the regime.

Be that as it may, however, should a situation develop which

threatens the Party's leadership system itself, there is always the possibility of a military coup d'état under the pretext of rescuing the Party. In other words, the military always has the potential of staging a coup d'état in the name of the Party, for the Party, and without damaging the Party's leadership structure. A typical case was the Polish coup d'état led by General Jaruzelski. In December of 1981 General Jaruzelski declared martial law and began to seize power militarily precisely under the pretext of rescue the collapsing United Workers' Party (Communist Party).³⁴ The purpose of General Jaruzelski's coup was not to topple the existing civilian government (Communist regime), but to crush the forces challenging the Communist Party's monopoly on power.³⁵

It was reported at the time that a few months before the Jaruzelski coup, the Polish government had been preparing for a military government. As part of a general exercise to seize political power militarily, generals had occupied key government positions and soldiers were dispatched to 'normalize' provincial administrative agencies.³⁶ This was part of the military's attempt to restore the rapidly crumbling Party authority in the face of the rising popularity of solidarity, an independent social movement and a true representative of the people. Should the Kim Jong-Il regime come to face a strong protest movement of the people and lose its legitimacy and authority due to failed policies, and should the Korean Workers' Party find itself on the verge of collapse, the North Korean military could, quite possibly, be forced to attempt a military adventure like the Jaruzelski coup.

³⁴ Luba Fajfer, "The Polish Military and the Crisis of 1970," *Communism and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (June 1993), pp. 205-225.

³⁵ Jacque Rupnik, *The Other Europe*, translated by Yoon Deok-Hee, "Eastern Europe Today," (Seoul: Literature and Intellectuals Publishing Co., 1990), pp. 209-210.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

Some witnesses have testified that as the Party's guidance and control functions weakened in the wake of economic hardship during the early days of Kim Jong-II's regime, he mobilized massive military forces to restore the Party's leadership authority and to preclude any possibility of social disturbance. In this connection, two North Korean defectors ("A" and "B"), gave personal testimonies, and following is a summary of their account:

"There was a massive domestic disturbance. A riot has erupted at Songrim Steel Mill in Hwanghae Province, and the military proposed to suppress the riot by deploying tanks. Subsequently, tank units moved in. Like the Tiananmen Square incident in China, they surrounded Songrim City at 5 a.m, arrested the riot leaders, and 'publicly executed' them on-site by firing squad. Public executions first took place during the 'hardship march' period. Subsequently, Kim Jong-II decided to enhance the roles of the Political Bureau of the Party and the Protective Command, and the military-first politics soon ensued. Once the military became indispensable for the containment of civilian riots, the stature and power of the military rose accordingly."

It is also reported that Kim Jong-II has mobilized the Ministry of People's Armed Forces to inspect the Party's Organization Guidance Department and to fire high-ranking Party officials, thus allowing the military to directly get involved in the purification of the Party. Subsequently, however, Kim Jong-II has gradually relaxed some of these measures and began to shift power away from the military and back to the Party, while institutionalizing the military-first politics. In this sense, it is possible to argue that Kim Jong-II himself had staged a Jaruzelski-style 'palace coup.' Of course, Kim Jong-II did not go as far as the 1981 Polish case, in which the military had replaced the Party leadership as 'the party in uniform' and 'the state in uniform.' However, there are some

similarities with the Jaruzelski coup in that Kim Jong-II has built up a 'military-first' structure with the military at the forefront, and in his capacity as the chairman of the NDC he began to rule the Party and the State, as well as the entire North Korean society. At any rate, it is possible to say that Kim Jong-II has succeeded in restoring the Party's leadership structure, which was in danger of collapse due to the economic hardship, by mobilizing the military and in stabilizing the new power structure he inherited.

Finally, we can ask, how long will this military-dependent, military-first political ruling structure last? In fact, Kim Jong-II's legitimacy as leader and authority over the military could suffer a serious setback if he were forced to give up (surrender) his nuclear option one-sidedly in the current nuclear and missile negotiations. Given Kim Jong-II's realistic perceptions regarding military power, chances are very slim that he will give in (or 'surrender') to the United States on the issue of weapons of mass destruction, including the nuclear option. Instead, Kim Jong-II is likely to drag on tediously the 'negotiation battle' with the United States, so that he can reinforce his image as a 'great military leader' engaged in an important battle, and buttress the legitimacy of his power and authority.

On the other hand, however, Kim Jong-II's obstinate and uncompromising posture toward the United States in terms of nuclear and missile issues is certain to result in sanctions by the international community, including the United States, and North Korea's economy is likely to slip into serious difficulties. Any exacerbation of the economic situation is certain to weaken the Party's overall capabilities again. The deteriorating economic conditions will also undermine the soldiers' quality of life, which in turn will adversely affect the life and welfare of the people in general, further exacerbating the civil-military relations. There is another element of danger: The Party's weakening guidance and

control capabilities will naturally force Kim Jong-II to rely more on the military, which in turn will undermine the legitimacy and authority of his Party leadership.

These developments, should they occur, would not only weaken the overall structure of Party-military unity and loyalty but could also trigger the following series of chain reactions: Increases in the unruly and socially disorderly behavior of soldiers (due to excesses of military-first politics) → Increasing public discontent against abusive and unruly soldiers → Worsening civil-military relations → A combined civil-military challenge to the Kim Jong-II regime. In sum, the outcome of the North Korean nuclear issue is going to be an important determinant and a significant indicator for the future of Kim Jong-II's regime.