

North Korea's 3rd KWP Delegates' Conference: Analysis and Outlook

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The 3rd Delegates' Conference of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and the September 2010 General Session were concluded on September 28th following the election of the KWP's highest ruling body, with Chairman Kim Jong Il in attendance. The significant features of this conference are as follows.

First, the hereditary succession of Kim Jong Il's third son Kim Jong Eun was set in motion. In the past various scenarios have been put forth about who will succeed Kim Jong Il, but with the outcome of this Party Conference it is clear that the Kim Jong Eun scenario has won out. Kim Jong Eun has ascended to successor status more rapidly than his father did. He firmly cemented his position as "de facto" successor through his promotion to 4-star general (9.27) and his appointment as vice chairman of the Party Central Military Commission and member of the Party Central Committee (9.28). However, as he was not appointed to the Politburo or the Secretariat, it appears it will take more time for him to completely achieve the status of official successor. However, his new position within the military through his appointment to vice chairman of the Party Central Military Commission underscores the importance of support by, and control over, the military establishment in the era of "military-first" politics.

Second, Chairman Kim Jong Il continues to prosper. Despite his health issues, he retained his posts as KWP general secretary, chairman of the Politburo Standing Committee, and chairman of the Central Military

Commission. Chairman Kim's continued high status signifies the effort to achieve a stable transfer of power to Kim Jong Eun by keeping the North Korean power structure firmly centered on Kim Jong Il.

Third, the traditional structure of elderly, middle-aged, and young elites has been maintained. Octogenarian Kim Young Nam remains president of the Supreme People's Assembly, while Kang Sok Ju (now in his 70s) remains vice minister, and Jang Song Taek (in his 60s) remains vice chairman of the NDC. In general, nearly all of the "Kim Jong Il associates" retained their posts as-is. This extremely conservative appointment of personnel in spite of the succession in progress reflects Kim Jong Il's desire to continue his style of "direct control" without any significant changes in any area. The only noteworthy item is the apparent rise of Director of Light Industry Kim Kyung Hee (in her 60s), NDC Vice Chair Jang Song Taek, Chief of General Staff Ri Young Ho, and Party Secretary for North Hwanghae Province Choi Ryong Hae to central positions of power within the party.

Fourth, relatives and 2nd generation partisans have advanced rapidly. Representative members of this group include Director of Light Industry Kim Kyung Hee, NDC Vice Chair Jang Song Taek, and North Hwanghae Party Secretary Choi Ryong Hae (2nd son of former Minister of the People's Armed Forces Choi Hyun). It is likely that Chief of General Staff Ri Young Ho is also a descendant of the partisan faction. These relatives and partisan descendants are seen as the advance guard of the Kim Jong Eun succession.

Meanwhile, this conference enacted some revisions to the KWP bylaws. References to "Communist social construction" were eliminated, supplementary revisions were made to the duties of party members and the job descriptions of the various ranks within the party structure, the party insignia and badges were revised, the party's leadership in the government and the Youth Alliance was strengthened, and the role of party organizations in the military was boosted; these supplementary revisions signify an effort to partially restore the "party-state system."

Looking at these personnel appointments and revisions to the bylaws, we can draw the following conclusions about North Korea's future domestic and foreign policy direction. First, *songun* will continue to be the guiding ideology. *Songun* ideology, which focuses absolute power on Kim Jong Il, will continue to operate as long as Kim Jong Il is firmly in power. However, the role of *songun* may fade according to the rate at which the succession system takes hold and foreign relations improve. Second, the transfer of power to Kim Jong Eun will continue. As was the case with his father's succession, Kim Jong Eun will progressively inherit the positions of supreme commander of the armed forces, leader of the republic, NDC chairman, and KWP general secretary. The key question is Kim Jong Eun's ability. Even after his father was internally appointed as successor within the party, he had work constantly to establish his succession as a *fait accompli*. Likewise Kim Jong Eun will need to accumulate many achievements in order to

cement his position as the definitive successor. Of course, he will need to enforce thorough organization-wide control to ensure that no voices of dissent emerge. If there is even a slight misstep, Kim Jong Eun could suffer a “fall from grace.”

Third, the so-called “Gang of Four” - Kim Kyung Hee, Jang Song Taek, Ri Young Ho, and Choi Ryong Hae - will spearhead the succession of Kim Jong Eun. Entrusted by Kim Jong Il with the task of aiding Kim Jong Eun politically, these four will step in to decisively eradicate any persons or policies which might stand as obstacles to the succession. However, this role could also become dangerous and could backfire on them. Particularly Ri Young Ho’s rapid advancement could become a heavy political burden to him in the future.

Fourth, Kim Jong Eun will devote his efforts to transforming the country into a “strong economic power.” To bring about the promised “strong and prosperous nation” by 2012, and to establish his achievements as successor, he may take “forward-looking” measures to improve the economy, while showing absolute devotion to Kim Jong Il. Of course, in order to make this happen he will need help from capitalist powers like South Korea, the US, and Japan, so he will also actively seek to improve relations with those countries.

Fifth, the revisions to the party bylaws indicate that the party’s status will increase to some degree. The party’s role in the government will increase and party control over the military will be expanded, and there will also be central guidance of party members. There may also be central guidance work done within the Central Committee. If the party succeeds in gaining control over the military and securing the support of the people, then the “party-state system” may be partially restored even though the *songun* system continues to dominate.