

Regime Evolution in the Post–Kim Jong Il Era and Development Dictatorship Systems Moving from a “Suryong” Dictatorship to a Development Dictatorship

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Online Series CO 11–36

1. Nuclear Weapons and the Noose around 24 Million Necks

The curtain has closed on the Kim Jong Il era in North Korea. Kim had taken on many titles over the years: from “Party Center” (mid–1970s to early 1980s), to “Comrade Dear Leader” (mid–1980s to mid–1990s), to “Great General” (after taking power). He was born on February 16th, 1941, in the border town of Vyatskoye in Russia’s Far East. A passage in Kim Il Sung’s memoirs affectionately recalled a time in the early spring of that year at Camp South (Vyatskoye Camp B) when he took some commemorative photographs with his comrades.

“That was probably the first time in my life that I had posed with a woman comrade individually. For Kim Jong Suk and me, it was as good as a wedding photo... It was an unforgettable first spring that we greeted after our wedding. As I wanted to remember that spring forever, I jotted down on the back of the photo: ‘Greeting the spring in a foreign land, March 1, 1941. At Camp B.’” (With the Century, Vol 8, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Pyongyang, 1998, p. 162).

North Korea officially recognizes 1942 as Kim Jong Il's birth year, to match neatly with Kim Il Sung's birth year of 1912. They also changed his birthplace to a guerrilla camp on Mt. Paekdu, a peak sacred to Koreans, imbuing Kim Jong Il with its holy image. In this way the regime fabricated a complete "birth legend." Kim Jong Il, who had been the supreme commander behind various acts of terrorism and provocations, passed away sometime on December 17th, 2011 in an "unknown location." It seems unthinkable that anyone in a normal state of mind could mourn his passing. Nevertheless, it would be short-sighted of us to hesitate over offering condolences.

As successor, Kim Jong Eun has inherited two things: nuclear weapons on the one hand, and a noose around the necks of 24 million people on the other. After a compressed apprenticeship period of just over 2 years, can this young successor fill the void left behind by the absolute dictator? As North Korea enters a period of crisis due to Kim Jong Il's sudden demise, the leadership class is showing solidarity around the young leader amid an atmosphere of "a community united by a shared fate." In the short term, as the Kim Jong Eun regime is affected by centripetal forces resulting from the "crisis situation," it appears unlikely that we will see any signs of internal disturbances. However, before long we may begin to see some differentiation and reorganization of political forces in the process of managing the country, as the stability of the "post-Kim Jong Il" regime is put to the test. The core of the problem is the issue of how to loosen the young dictator's grasp on those nuclear weapons and the noose he holds around 24 million necks.

Direction of North Korean System Change and Regime Evolution

Before we can resolve the nuclear issue and encourage North Korean reform and opening, the character of the regime itself must change. "Regime change" for the sake of changing the North Korean system is actually impossible, and a policy focused on sanctions is unlikely to work while the North Korean regime is cohesive enough to withstand them. Therefore, instead of "regime change," "regime evolution" would be a more logical and practical policy objective. A "regime evolution policy" implies a policy of aiding the emergence of pro-change forces within a country, and for this purpose international society must apply an appropriate combination of carrots and sticks while moving toward an aid/cooperation mode. Therefore a regime evolution policy would pursue gradual and indirect change via diplomatic measures, such as political and economic negotiations, rather than physical military force.

Aside from a policy of regime change (that is, regime evolution), there is no policy

capable of producing a solution to the nuclear issue and promoting the reform and opening needed to improve living conditions in North Korea. The policy of refusing to talk or negotiate with the dictatorship has only made the regime more isolated and resulted in tighter internal controls. However, if political and economic cooperation can be achieved through “patient” negotiations for the purpose of resolving the nuclear issue and establishing peace on the peninsula, North Korea’s internal controls may soften. Therefore, instead of isolating and blockading the North Korean regime through pressure and sanctions, we must pursue change through “integration.” An integration strategy seeks to change the form of the North Korean regime with the hope of ultimately changing its very essence.

From Military–First to People–First and Economy–First Policies

North Korean regime evolution connotes a shift from “military–first” to “people–first” and “economy–first” policies. The “military–first” system not only established military rule of the country as its primary principle, but also raised the status and role of the military to an ideological level through the exaltation of “military–first ideology.” In the Kim Il Sung era, the leader’s charisma was sufficient and there was no need to bring the military to the fore. But in the Kim Jong Il era, as the Party grew increasingly incompetent and corrupt and the loyalty of the masses weakened, the military was judged to be only group reliable enough to serve as a governing base. Thus the military–first system was created, giving the military a special role and elevated status as the ultimate stronghold of internal control.

Under the *suryong* (“Great Leader”) system, in which the military formed the backbone of the state supported by force of arms, it was hard to foresee the regime implementing any policies of reform and opening to restore the economy or improve the people’s standard of living. The philosophy of “defending the *suryong* with guns and swords” not only resulted in a foreign policy more conducive to war than peace, set an uncompromising philosophy of provocative activism as a yardstick for regime loyalty, and rejected rational and amenable foreign relations, but also gave the military exclusive rights to all resources through its status as the ultimate stronghold of internal control, thereby hindering the logical use and distribution of national resources. This military–first system must be transformed into a “people–first” system that emphasizes the people’s standard of living and an “economy–first” system that emphasizes economic recovery and development.

Moving from a “Suryong” Dictatorship to a Development Dictatorship

The post–Kim Jong Il system must change from a *suryong* dictatorship to a development dictatorship. In a *suryong* dictatorship, fundamental reform and opening are almost impossible. Under the military–first political system, regime security was given top priority, and economic matters were treated as secondary to military security matters, resulting in an inevitable disregard for public living standards and human rights. By contrast, a development dictatorship would be able to pursue reform and opening. Matters of security and economic development can be promoted side–by–side, and over time the society may gradually evolve into one that is dominated more by economic concerns than security concerns.

A development dictatorship is a dictatorship that acts in the name of development, in the sense of a developing nation. Among the countries of Central America, Africa, and more recently Central Asia, there are many examples of dictatorships “*sans* development” where corruption has become the norm. A development dictatorship puts economic development and national prosperity first, limiting citizens’ rights and liberties while promoting industrialization and modernization; among Asian nations, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia have each provided precedents of this kind of dictatorship in the past. In the present day these nations, together with China, have become locomotives powering the global economy. In light of this reality, it may be said that this kind of development dictatorship constitutes a sort of “necessary evil” for developing countries. The North Korean regime must ultimately transform into a system that satisfies the norms of human civilization, but in the short–term it needs to become a “development–oriented dictatorship” in order to solve its economic problems and improve the people’s quality of life in real terms. As a “dictatorship *sans* development” and a “dictatorship that takes no responsibility for the people’s living standards” it is far more dangerous, and it is impossible to find any value in its existence.

Moving toward a development dictatorship would allow North Korea to maintain its regime while making some positive progress, and as a close relative of North Korea’s *suryong* system it would be a reasonable course for the regime to take, if a somewhat adventurous one. The philosophy or rationale of a development dictatorship is that regime legitimacy is based on economic growth and national prosperity; this requires both a foundation of strong leadership and a cadre of competent, ambitious officials. In terms of ideology, leadership, and execution, North Korea already possesses the Party and institutional organs needed for a development dictatorship and is equipped with a mobilization system for efficient

economic development.

In human history, there is no such thing as a quick fix. However, in order for North Korea to shorten the economic gap between itself and South Korea in a short period of time it needs to emulate the South Korean model of condensed, focused economic growth. The argument that North Korea must immediately adopt the principles of democracy and market economy is no more than a “quick fix” fantasy that ignores the reality of North Korea, and is simply another form of a unification-through-absorption policy.

South Korea's Role and Cooperation in Security and Development

For North Korea to transform into a development dictatorship, the most essential factor will be South Korea's cooperation. South Korean cooperation on security and development will be particularly important. Changes to the North Korean system can only be expected at a stage where regime security is not greatly threatened. Therefore, for the sake of North Korean regime evolution, security cooperation will be essential. For this purpose, while resolutely acknowledging the reality of North Korea's nuclear weapons, we need to establish a new “Peace Regime Initiative,” an approach that is far more daring and comprehensive than the existing peace regime debate. South Korea is no longer a weak, insignificant country swayed by its powerful neighbors or a passive player in world events. If Korea's national division and war were the products of a hegemonic struggle among the great powers, then now is the time for us to achieve peace and unification through our own capabilities and willpower. Now is the time to revive the spirit of the 9.19 Joint Declaration, an international agreement that provided a clue to resolving the nuclear issue and establishing a peace regime, and demonstrate a more assertive stance through a “Peninsular Peace Initiative.”

Meanwhile, development cooperation is desperately needed in North Korea. This is an area in which South Korea's “strategic pragmatism” can shine. In this regard we can look back on the precedent of the agreement made at the inter-Korean summit in October 2007. Although the two sides had different strategic objectives in signing that agreement, there was no disputing the fact that South and North would have to work together to implement the various action items. If development cooperation is operated as a joint project, it can provide an opportune moment to transform inter-Korean relations into “win-win” mode. In any relationship, whether between individuals or countries, the strong side must know how to spare the pride of the weak side. If we are confident in our goals for the future of our people, we need to be patient and tolerant regarding North Korea's abnormal and

at times downright inappropriate behavior.

If we pursue security and development cooperation with North Korea with the goal of initiating regime evolution, there should be no cause for ideological arguments over security issues or wasteful debates on the excessiveness of aid, and with consensus and support from the public a “comprehensive” North Korea/unification policy will become possible. North Korea also desires cooperative assistance in the form of international development aid, and such development cooperation will inevitably promote external opening. South Korea’s cooperation in security and development can stimulate regime evolution in North Korea, and if North Korea evolves into a development dictatorship in the future we can enjoy a symbiotic relationship.