

## April 2012: Project Deadline for Building a Strong, Prosperous Nation in North Korea

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North Korea's project to "open the gates of a strong and prosperous nation" (*kangseongdaeguk*) is scheduled to be completed in mid-April. This project was announced in late 2007, but it only began in earnest in early 2009. On the surface, the main pillar of this project was to improve the economy and raise the people's standard of living.

But in reality, it appears that "opening the gates of a strong and prosperous nation" was code for building the Kim Jong Eun succession structure. Or perhaps the former was only one structural element of the latter. This article examines the reasons behind this interpretation, and explains the major political and policy moves that appear to be related to building the succession structure and "opening the gates to a strong and prosperous nation."

### The Year 2007 and Political Changes

Since the late 2000s, there has been a close connection between fluctuations in North Korea's internal power dynamics, its internal and external policy directions, and construction of the succession system. This has been a period in which political and policy changes have sometimes occurred in swarms. There are two time periods in particular that deserve attention. The first is 2007, and the second is from late 2008 to early 2009.

First let us examine 2007. In April of that year two important personnel changes occurred. First, Prime Minister Pak Bong Ju, the man who had directed the reform policy, lost his position. This represented the retreat of the faction that had given political support to the Pak Bong Ju policy line. Meanwhile, General Chief of Staff Kim Young Chun, a key player in the *songun* (military-first) political system that had been in place since 1995, was appointed vice chairman of the NDC, thus moving from a position of real power to a position of nominal power. These personnel changes were accompanied by many policy changes. From May, a fierce struggle against “anti-socialist elements” unfolded throughout the country with the goal of cleansing the “lingering toxins” from the reforms. Then in early 2008 there was a broad crackdown on military trading companies. Continuing throughout 2007–2008, major personnel who had been involved in inter-Korean trade were purged. These purges represented the ripple effects of political changes at the top filtering down to the lower levels, as a shift occurred in who would manage the income from inter-Korean economic cooperation projects. The second inter-Korean summit occurred against the backdrop of these clear changes in the leadership on domestic and South Korea policies. The inter-Korean summit was originally planned for August, but ended up happening in October. That October, Jang Sung Taek was promoted to administrative director of the Party, putting him in charge of police, prosecution and judiciary, and at the same time repression of the markets conspicuously increased. Amid these developments, it appears that sometime in 2007 Kim Jong Eun was internally approved as successor. A conference of intellectuals held from November 30<sup>th</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup> declared the goal of “Opening the Gates of a Strong and Prosperous Nation in 2012.”

In sum, the various personnel and policy changes in 2007, the second inter-Korean summit, Kim Jong Eun’s internal designation as successor, and the project to “open the gates of a strong and prosperous nation by 2012” all appear to be inter-connected and to have been devised at nearly the same time. However it seems the regime was unable to carry through with these government plans because of the major environmental shift brought on by the change in administration in South Korea in 2008.

## Political Changes in Late 2008

Next let us look at events from late 2008 to early 2009. In this period internal shifts in the power structure, domestic and foreign policy changes, and major changes related to construction of the succession system occurred side-by-side. From October to December 2008, as Kim Jong Il recovered from the stroke he had suffered the previous August and returned to the forefront, it appears that he

decreed a new governmental plan and a reorganization of the power structure. This plan probably encompassed the period from 2009 to 2012. In January of 2009 work began in earnest on building up the succession system around Kim Jong Eun. From February to April the power of the “old military” faction which had held power since 1995 under *songun* weakened, and members of the “new military” leadership such as Ri Young Ho and Kim Young Chul emerged through a reorganization amid various personnel changes and a constitutional revision. There were also striking changes in domestic and foreign policy. From early 2009 North Korea began blatantly promoting itself as a “nuclear power” while taking a harder foreign policy line, and in April and May it performed a missile launch and a nuclear test respectively. These changes brought the North’s foreign policy position on nuclear weapons into sharper relief and seemingly reflected the increased influence of the new military. Meanwhile in domestic policy the North began implementing more concrete policies related to “opening the gates of a strong and prosperous nation in 2012.” In early 2009 they announced a list of economic goals to be met by 2012, and in 2009 domestic economic policy was ramped up even further through the 150-day battle and the currency reform. From 2009 until his death in December 2011, Kim Jong Il made on-site guidance tours with unprecedented frequency at economy-related sites, focusing on key national industries in the heavy and chemical manufacturing sector. The poster project of the national mission to “open the gates of a strong and prosperous nation,” the building of 100,000 new housing units in Pyongyang, began in August of 2009.

### “Opening the Gates of a Strong and Prosperous Nation” and Building the Kim Jong Eun Succession Structure at the Same Time

Upon re-examining the policy developments of 2009, 2010, and 2011, we can identify a national governing plan which was drafted by Kim Jong Il in late 2008 and set to be completed by April 15<sup>th</sup> 2012, comprised of the following 8 points:

First, the core element is construction of the Kim Jong Eun succession system. This has proceeded through Kim Jong Eun’s formal appointment as vice chairman of the Party Central Military Committee via the Party Delegates’ Conference in September 2010 and his secretive inheritance of the position of head of government from October 8th, 2011.

Second, ruling power was transferred to another group. The leaders of the old military and the civilian bureaucrats (like Ri Jeh Gang) who had been appointed

by Kim Jong Il to manage state affairs from 1995 to the early 2000s were retired, and the new military and a new cadre of civilian bureaucrats took their place.

Third, the North's foreign and South Korea policies hardened. It sought to show off its WMD capabilities in order to gain external recognition as a nuclear power, while at the same time making conciliatory moves to try to enter negotiations. In terms of South Korea policy, the North employed a combination of pressure and conciliation in an attempt to recapture the initiative, but engaged in bold-faced attacks as well.

Fourth, the state-run economy was strengthened while the markets and the private economy were weakened. Specifically, state-run industries in the heavy and chemical manufacturing sector became more normalized and the state-run light industry sector was promoted, boosting the priority of the state-run sectors of the national economy in terms of distribution and employment. If successful, this would have bolstered the state economy while striking a strong physical blow against market activities, decisively increasing the state's control over the peoples' means of livelihood.

Fifth was the refusal to reform. At the core of economic management were the rejection of reform measures and the strengthening of mobilization, while science and technology were broadly emphasized. The representative slogan of this mobilization effort was "the great upsurge" of labor mobilization. This phrase has become a keyword in economic projects since 2009. Furthermore throughout 2009, 2010, and 2011 new phrases were created and intensively promoted, such as "CNC," "cutting-edge breakthrough struggle," "a strong country with a knowledge economy," and "industrial revolution for the new century."

Sixth, strategies were established for raising funds through various enterprises. Funds were to be raised through increased mineral exports to China, exploitation of the domestic economy through rampant inflation, seizing foreign currency held inside the country through policies such as forbidding its use, forcing various agencies and overseas workers to bring back obligatory quotas of foreign currency and food supplies, and usurious practices such as distributing rights to import daily necessities and manipulating prices.

Seventh, internal repression measures were strengthened. Specifically the People's Security Agency grew stronger, anti-socialist activity inspections and border controls were enforced more strictly, and harsher punishments for

defection were put in place.

The eighth and final point is stronger relations with China and policies to keep China in check. North Korea worked hard to get political approval and financial support for its succession government from China. Every time the opportunity arose in the process of nuclear negotiations, North Korea reaffirmed that it was willing to reevaluate its relations with the US, making conciliatory gestures to the US for the sake of its relations with China.

Thus we can see that in 2007 and again in 2008/2009 North Korea made a series of major decisions regarding the composition of its power structure, domestic and foreign policies, and construction of the succession system. Particularly in early 2009, as the Kim Jong Eun succession system began to be built in earnest, plans to “open the gates of a strong and prosperous country in 2012” also began to take on real form. Looking at the details, in the economic sense “opening the gates of a strong and prosperous country in 2012” meant nothing more than a component of a project to make various adjustments to the internal and external environment for power succession. The deadline for this project was set for April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Thus even though its principle planner and executioner, Kim Jong Il, passed away on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the regime had no choice but to continue with this project. However, guidance of the project has shifted from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Eun and his backers.

## Conclusion

A Party Delegates' Conference, a Supreme People's Assembly meeting, and events celebrating Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday are all expected to take place around mid-April of 2012. These events will lay the political and policy cornerstone for the country's future as the regime concludes the governing plans implemented by Kim Jong Il since 2009. While he was still alive Kim Jong Il probably already took steps toward future plans beyond April 15<sup>th</sup>. Two particular actions are representative of this. First, in early October 2011 government leadership was transferred to Kim Jong Eun. Second, shortly before his death in December Kim Jong Il approved an agreement with the US on the nuclear issue.

But with Kim Jong Il's death, responsibility for implementing his governing plan has passed to Kim Jong Eun and his supporting clique. April 15<sup>th</sup> may usher in major changes in terms of politics and policy. First, in terms of politics there may be some fluctuations in the power structure. This will focus on the positioning of major individuals and organizations within the overall power structure. We will be

particularly interested in seeing whether the power reorganization implemented by Kim Jong Il remains in place and functional. Second, in terms of policy, the question is whether domestic and foreign policies will change. We will be looking for changes in the direction of various policies or their order of priority. Just as in the reorganization of the power structure, in setting a policy direction as well we can expect to see intense tension and rivalry among different factions over the distribution of vested rights and interests.

Looking at the overall picture, the events scheduled for mid-April will be more important in terms of reorganization of the political power structure than in terms of policy changes. Based on the adjustments to various organizations made by the Central Party at the Party Delegates' Conference in September 2010, the Party Delegates' Conference in April is also expected to take measures strengthening the political functions of the Central Party organs. However, this will not mean a full restoration of the Party organization's influence to its heyday of the 1970s and 80s. Even if the Central Party organs become more normalized, the character of the North Korean regime will inevitably differ from that of the past, due to the changed environment. The durability of Kim Jong Eun and his supporting clique will depend on how smoothly this new regime functions in managing the various problems of North Korea's internal politics.