



ASSESSING POLITICAL STABILITY IN POST-KIM JONG-IL NORTH KOREA

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the prospects for political stability in North Korea as we approach the one-year mark since Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011. Taking an intermediate approach between quantitative models and micro-tracking appearances and rankings of individuals, the paper examines developments in the North Korean government's policies towards its citizens, party and military elites, and foreign policy. The speed, scale, scope, and variety of policies, as long as equilibrium is maintained, indicate that North Korea will remain stable for at least the next five years, although with possibilities for a significant increase in the potential for instability should food supply not improve during the five-year window.

Introduction

The avalanche of global media coverage triggered by the North Korean media's announcement on December 19, 2011 that Kim Jong-il had died on December 17 contained within it predictable warnings of imminent state collapse, this time from the allegedly inevitable internal conflicts among the elite that would ensue from the ascension of a young, relatively untested Kim Jong-un to the throne. Many of these warnings have faded in urgency a year after Kim Jong-il's death. Nonetheless, there remains considerable range in assessments of political stability in North Korea over the past year. On the one hand, nearly every visit to a funfair by Kim Jong-un or a trip by North Korean emissaries to a Southeast Asian country is brandished as an example of desperation and underlying instability. On the other, sales of missiles parts or unwillingness to uphold security agreements are often treated as the actions of an untrustworthy, calculating, and formidable adversary. So is North Korea in the post-Kim

Jong-il era riven by elite factionalism, distracted by amusement parks, and teetering on the brink of domestic political implosion, or is it a ruthless, relentless, lean guerilla state readying itself for a diabolical international explosion?

This paper argues that the sheer scale, speed, and variety of policies and activities undertaken since the formal launch of Kim Jong-un's rule at the 4th Korean Workers Party (KWP) General Assembly in April 2012 indicate that North Korea is in fact politically stable, and likely to remain so for the next five years at the very least. Unlike some observers who warn of imminent collapse, or those who conclude that the state is likely to remain in near perpetuity due to the power of its ideology, the actual time frame and analysis is more intermediate. The analysis of North Korea's recent policies towards its rank and file, reforms and changes among the elites and cadres, and developments in the country's international relations indicates that Kim Jong-un's control over the country will continue to strengthen. The caveat is that equilibrium has to be maintained in the speed, scale, and scope of economic reforms. If the economy cannot generate a sufficient food supply, in other words, maintain a balance between avoiding famine and reforming too rapidly, regardless of the instruments of oppression and distraction available to the North Korean state, the potential for political instability would likely increase. Nonetheless, there seems at present to be little likelihood of a military coup, foreign intervention, negotiated regime change, or mass revolution in the next five years.

1. Approaches

It has become a truism to note that political prognostications often appear to have been based on slender and overwrought assumptions in hindsight, and that in any case, most predictions

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by social scientists are more often incorrect than not.¹ Given the difficulties in accessing and confirming information about North Korea's political processes, predictions and projections for the country are even more firmly located in the province of soothsayers and fortunetellers than for most nation-states. Nevertheless, the exercise of assessing North Korea's political stability and making projections based on the best available information and logic remains important and useful when there are not insignificant numbers of declarations and comments on North Korea's political stability fuelled largely by wishful thinking and/or vituperative posturing.

There are multiple analytical angles from which to approach the question of political stability/instability in post-Kim Jong-il North Korea. At one end of the quantitative-qualitative spectrum, the Political Instability Index, World Governance Indicators, Political Risk Index, and other projects use available national data for quantitative models that can be applied to all countries. The Political Instability Index for example has isolated a bandwidth within which states generally maintain stability, based on a formula of largely (but not exclusively) four variables: economic development as reflected in the infant mortality rate, clear and consistent economic discrimination against specific minority groups, having at least four neighboring states that experienced violent conflicts, and regime type. Based largely for its well-documented economic problems, North Korea ranked in the high-risk category of the Political Instability Index (13/165), increasing its instability ranking from the previous year.² The Political Risk Index places North Korea slightly higher in its table as the 8th most at risk country for 2012, while the Global Innovation Index at INSEAD, which has a section on political environment and stability, leaves out North Korea altogether from its list of 141 countries.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the range of practices that might be placed under the rubric of "North Korea-watching." This usually involves tracking the number of appearances of an individual in public settings with the leader, tracing order of listing in official rosters for events, poring over still shots from news broadcasts of the Korean Central News Agency, or stitching together information from defectors, visitors, and other sources. These details are essential, but do not necessarily provide, at least in isolation, sufficient context to analyze and project overall political stability.

The approach I take here is intermediate and qualitative, based on the existing conceptualization to analyzing political stability

in authoritarian regimes and use of materials published by North Korea as well in South Korea, Japan, China, and other countries. Among the existing typologies, the most common one is threefold: personalist, military, and single party, with the general consensus among scholars who apply this that political succession in the single-party state is the most stable.³ Under this categorization, North Korea has been placed in the hybrid category of personalist and single-party rule, but this overlooks the major role of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in both administration and economic activity.⁴ A more appropriate typology for North Korea is fourfold - tinpots (low repression and loyalty), tyrants (high repression, low loyalty), totalitarians (high levels of both), and timocrats (low repression, high loyalty).⁵ North Korea can be categorized as totalitarian – high levels of repression and high levels of loyalty, despite the impression given by some defectors and activists that there is only high repression and low loyalty. Under this classification, whether the North Korean state is right (national socialist) or left (socialist or communist) is less important than the fact that it can wield various strategies and tactics to exercise societal control and loyalty within the existing system.

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Thus, the key becomes whether the extent and ultimately effect of societal controls, incentives, and distractions are sufficient to maintain or strengthen political stability. Within the scale, scope, and variety of policies, the keyword for political stability is “equilibrium.” This is not in the sense of a formal application of Nash and other relevant equilibriums but as a figurative strategy for the North Korean government in specific policy areas. For example, in specific policy areas, Kim Jong-un must maintain a balance between ruling via social controls and distracting people via broadcasts of amusement park openings in Pyongyang, between buying loyalty and instilling fear. Within the economy, equilibrium has to be maintained between starvation and prosperity in economic policy. Stationary bandits, unlike roving bandits, have an interest in preserving to some extent the wealth of the society from which they steal.⁶ Assuming then totalitarian



governments are the evolutionary descendants of stationary bandits, even dictators need to provide sufficient public goods in order to mobilize labor, retain societal control, and foster loyalty. At the same time, an overly healthy economy in such states may undermine political control as much as deteriorating material conditions might, as autonomous socio-economic groups may emerge as a result.⁷ In elite politics, Kim Jong-un needs to maintain equilibrium in power distributions between the three major administrative organs, the Cabinet, the Korean Workers Party (KWP), and the Korean People's Army (KPA) as he attempts to consolidate control over internal resources. In foreign policy, maintaining equilibrium between grappling with clear and palpable external threats and engagement through cultural exchanges and other symbolic gestures of cooperation appears to remain the *modus operandi*.

2. Mass Distractions

The primary goal for Kim Jong-un has been to inject charisma, symbolic authority, and actual power into his rule. This has been accomplished through invocations of the past via his resemblance to his grandfather, emphasis on legitimacy via his bloodlines, and staged performances of youthful, energetic leadership and commitment to the comfort of his comrades. In this light, Kim Jong-un's nearly countless visits to funfairs and other public facilities cannot simply be dismissed as reflections of an immature leader more attracted to entertainment than political and economic challenges, or dismissed as bizarre and trivial. Rather, these should be read as clever performances of caring and tools of mass distraction. The number and range of these social reforms, such as they may be in substance, indicate an awareness of and ability to innovate and update past practices. Kim Jong-un appears to be aiming to maintain equilibrium between providing rhetoric and material outcomes that indicate to the citizens that he cares, but at the same time, he does not want to relax social controls to the extent that citizens would be free to voice protest.

The sheer volume and variety of these social reforms and the extent to which the elites from the KWP and the KPA have been mobilized for many of the opening ceremonies, on-site guidances and inspections, indicate that these are part of a calculated and systematic attempt to strengthen mass loyalty among the rank and file towards Kim Jong-un. The Young Leader is portrayed as the caring and vigorous leader of the country, presenting visible tangible benefits for his people, creating some distraction, either actual or vicarious, for the reality of malnutrition and

food shortages in the country. The fact that most of these facilities are concentrated in Pyongyang and inaccessible to the majority of the population is less important than their propaganda value as allegedly material evidence of the state's concern for people's lives.

Aside from mass distraction, Kim Jong-un has begun mass mobilization of segments of the population that had been relatively under-utilized during his father's time, namely youth and women. After officially anointing Kim Jong-un as his successor in September 2010 at the 3rd KWP General Assembly, Kim Jong-il attended the annual concert of the Youth League for the first time in ten years in November 2010, paving the path for the succession and for Kim Jong-un's own propaganda and mobilization tactics. Newscasts on North Korean TV frequently featured segments on youth working or studying throughout 2012, reaching a crescendo around Youth Day on August 27. Kim Jong-un attended multiple concerts and assemblies. Youth League groups descended on the capital over the summer holding training sessions but also taking in amusement parks, such as the Kaesŏn Youth Park, while editorials emphasized the importance of youth in building a strong nation throughout the year.⁸ While Youth Day itself was only established in 1991, the Youth League has long been a powerful organization along with KWP and KPA. As all youth between the ages of fourteen and thirty are required at least on paper to join their local Youth League branch, the scale of the organization and its multiple functions as mobilized labor and monitors for dissidence and discontent means the Youth League serves as a large pool for recruiting the next generation KWP elites.⁹ In fact, many current elites gained initial experience in leadership through the Youth League, most notably, Kim Jong-un's uncle Chang Sŏng-t'aek and protégé Ch'oe Ryong-hae.

Women have also been mobilized and 'recognized' under Kim Jong-un's rule. Kim Jong-il had technically forbidden women from riding bicycles throughout the country in the mid-1990s. Kim Jong-un repealed his father's law in August 2012, implicitly recognizing that women have been using bicycles outside of Pyongyang, and that women have been essential to maintaining markets in areas outside of the capital.¹⁰ Mothers have also been spotlighted. When Kim Jong-un remarked during a site guidance visit to a horticultural research center on September 22, 2012 that the flowers he saw would make good gifts on Mother's Day, observers concluded that a new holiday had been established. International Women's Day (March 8) had been a public holiday,



but no Mother's Day had been celebrated previously. As it turned out, Kim Jong-un announced that November 16 was to be Mother's Day in order to mark a 1961 Kim Il-sung speech at a KWP Central Committee meeting on the importance of the role of mothers in revolution. The 4th Assembly of Mothers met on November 15 and met with Kim Jong-un in the build-up to Mother's Day. Kim Il-sung's wife and Kim Jong-un's grandmother, Kim Chŏng-Suk, who had been officially named one of the Three Great Generals of Paekdusan (along with the Father and the Son) in December 1997, was featured in several segments on TV, reinforcing the revolutionary role not just of mothers but also the "Paekdusan bloodlines" (royal bloodlines) of Kim Jong-un through repeated showings of photographs of young Kim Il-sung with Kim Chŏng-suk and Kim Jong-il as a child.¹¹ Ko Yŏng-hŭi, Kim Jong-un's mother was not referred to, indicating that Kim Jong-un is aware that the cost-benefit balance did not warrant a public apotheosis of his own mother, who was a Korean born in Japan, a group that has been discriminated against for the most part in North Korea, and not Kim Jong-il's official wife. In fact, a hagiographic film of Ko Yŏng-hŭi produced in 2011 that repeatedly referred to her as our "respected Mother" (but never by her name) was screened to KWP and KPA officials during May 2012, but not shown to the public.¹² The public appearances of Ri Sol-ju (Yi Sŏl-ju), Kim Jong-un's wife, presumably a symbol of the new and modern young women of North Korea, can be seen as another documented attempt to make better use of women for political mobilization.

Either directly or indirectly, through photos and other propaganda, these mobilizations also create linkages to the past and help infuse Kim Jong-un with the necessary legitimacy and charisma. For example, the main inspiration for the emphasis on culture (amusement parks, shows, roller skating, etc.) seems to be Kim Jong-il's 1973 "Three Revolutions Team Movement" that featured Youth League leaders as a vanguard for a wider social movement to revolutionize thought, technology, and culture.¹³ In 1977, Kim Jong-il oversaw renovations to the National Zoo (opened in 1959) and opened the first amusement park in North Korea in the same year, presaging Kim Jong-un's frequent on-site guidance visits to various cultural facilities in 2012. After officially introducing Kim Jong-un his successor at the 3rd KWP General Assembly held in September 2010, Kim Jong-il in fact visited several public facilities, including amusement parks and the Central Zoo.¹⁴ If Kim Jong-il wrote treatises in book form on various dimensions of arts and culture, with a particular emphasis on film as the medium of the future, Kim

Jong-un issues Twitter-like missives about how "music without politics is like a flower without a fragrance, and politics without music is like politics without a heart."¹⁵ Numerous articles that recall Kim Jong-il's concern for the people, youth and women further vulcanize the links between Kim Jong-un and his father. One North Korean report recounts how Kim Jong-il, just a few days before his death (December 4, 2011), toured the Kaesŏn Youth Park with Kim Jong-un despite the bracing cold weather to ensure with his own eyes that the park was operating smoothly and that all visitors were enjoying themselves, while another recounts how Kim Jong-il constantly worried about the people.¹⁶ Of course, the replacement of Kim Il-sung monuments at multiple locations with two statues, one of Kim Il-sung and the other of Kim Jong-il, is another element of this invocation of the past to lacquer legitimization myths and renew old idols. There are, predictably, the usual myths about Kim Jong-un published in book form and broadcast in the news. The same stories had been in circulation among the KWP and KPA rank and file since 2009 "Documents on the greatness of Young leader Comrade Kim Jong-un" (Ch'ŏngnyŏn taejang Kim Jong-un tongji e taehan widaesŏng charyo), but apparently, if Kim Jong-il made eleven straight hole in ones in golf, then Kim Jong-un was able to drive at fast speeds at six, was a perfect pistol shot as a child from 100 meters away, and can speak English, German, French, and Italian, etc.¹⁷

The mass distractions and social mobilizations have been balanced by rhetorical and material calls and actual controls for renewed commitment to the revolution, most notably in the declarations regarding the "untrodden snow path spirit" that became even more ubiquitous after a front page editorial on "untrodden snow paths" was published in *Rodong sinmun* on October 16.¹⁸ However, the phrase had actually been used with gradually increasing frequency after Kim Jong-il's death, in particular after an article reflecting on the "spirit of taking untrodden snow paths" was published in July 2012.¹⁹ The propaganda connects the 1990s "arduous march" during the famines and the ever-growing revolutionary spirit to steel the masses to take the path previously not taken. This is consistent with a longer trajectory in North Korean rhetoric: North Korean officials concluded that insufficient investment in ideology, ethics and morals was one of the reasons why the Soviet-bloc collapsed in the late-1980s and early-1990s. Consequently, the state had been emphasizing since the 1990s training and education in ethics, morals, and thought.²⁰



Societal distractions and resource distributions are insufficient, so fortified oppression and controls via increasing personnel social security and national security departments has long been, as has been well-documented, a significant part of North Korea's domestic strategy.²¹ Increased border security has resulted in a noticeable decrease in the number of refugees. According to the Ministry of Unification in South Korea, the number of North Korean refugees/defectors entering South Korea declined from 2,706 for 2011, to 1,202 from January to October 2012, so possibly 1,400-1,500 by year's end. Kim Jong-un has repeatedly called on police officers and judges urging for the capture and punishment of "anti-state criminals," and visited the Ministry of State Security twice this fall, exhorting the protection of the people from "traitors."²² Human rights violations continue, as do the documentaries on these camps and survivors' lives.²³

Moreover, there have been numerous reports of intensification of attempts to track down North Korean refugees in China and return them to North Korea, and even more dramatically, scout, persuade, or threaten North Korean refugees in South Korea to return to the North. In fact, three press conferences featuring refugees or defectors who returned to the North have been broadcast on North Korean TV in the last five months. On June 28, Pak In-suk held a press conference, claiming that she felt ashamed to have left the country but was moved when Kim Jong-un provided her with an apartment and welcomed her back. On July 19, Chŏn Yŏng-ch'ŏl claimed that the South had sent him back with orders to destroy the statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il at Mansudae (but prevented and forgiven, according to the press conference), and on November 8, a couple with a young baby, husband Kim Kwang-hyŏk and wife Ko Chŏng-nam, spoke of the disappointment and discrimination they experienced during their four years in the South, despite the fact that according to neighbors, the couple, or at least the wife, had seemed quite content in Seoul, and the husband's mother and younger sister were still in South Korea.²⁴ There have been reports that KWP and workplace managers were instructed to ensure 100 percent viewership of the TV interview, and even provided electricity to offices to generate this result. Most South Korean media outlets speculated that Pak In-suk was likely forced to return by the fact that her son had been left in North Korea since 2006, and may have been used as a hostage.²⁵ Others have also been persuaded or coerced into returning as well, with some observers estimating that a hundred people have returned to the North in the first half of 2012 alone.²⁶

3. Elite Differentiations

The theme of equilibrium is even more salient at the level of elite differentiation. Kim Jong-un has rapidly reshuffled decision-making power over economic matters away from the KPA to the KWP and the Cabinet. Yet, he cannot afford to upset the symbiotic equilibrium between these three major administrative entities. In terms of maintaining equilibrium in speed of personnel changes, Kim Jong-un has acted quickly to consolidate power by removing many advisors who had been close to his father. At the same time, he seems to have avoided unnecessarily triggering organized opposition by over-pacing personnel changes.

Kim Jong-un has actually been following in the well-established tactics employed by his grandfather and father to consolidate power, namely purging potential rivals, undertaking large-scale personnel changes, and promoting those most loyal to them. Nevertheless, the game of musical chairs in top positions in the KWP, KPA, and the Cabinet has been occurring with unprecedented alacrity since April 2012. It took Kim Il-sung decades, from 1948 to 1967, to eliminate various rival factions, and likewise, Kim Jong-il took around ten years, from 1974 to the mid-1980s, to build his own network among the KPA officers. Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un had together initiated a generational shift within the KWP around September 2010 by retiring KWP members sixty and above. But more surprisingly, since April 2012, Kim Jong-un has made changes to one-fourth of all Cabinet Minister posts, and consolidated economic planning under the Cabinet and the KWP.²⁷

Pak Myong-ch'ŏl (born 1941), the son-in-law of Rikidōzan, the Zainichi professional wrestler, and sworn blood brother of Kim Jong-il (they lived together when they were children) was removed from his position as Minister of Sports.²⁸ Other ministers, including Kim Pong-ch'ŏl (1941, Commerce), Na Tong-hui (1939, Land Transportation), and Yi Kyŏng-sik (1946, Agriculture), were all replaced by much younger ministers born after the end of the Korean War. In the meantime, several former Cabinet officials with experience in economic affairs, including Han Kwang-bok, former Vice Premier and former Minister of Electrical Engineering, Pak Pong-ju (Premier from 2003 to 2007), Kwak Pŏm-gi (former Vice Premier), and Yi Su-yong were appointed to a range of positions within the KWP.

Numerous changes among the top officials in the KPA have also proved to be constant fodder for military rank and number watchers, as well as the media and intelligence, with speculation



about what these changes mean running rampant. I would suggest that speed and scale of these changes, as well as the existence of similar tactics used to control the selectocracy in the KWP and KPA by Kim Jong-il in particular, would seem to indicate that the various promotions, demotions, and re-promotions of KPA officers is not a sign of a military coup or organized opposition, but of bringing the KPA under tighter KWP and Cabinet control. Individual officers may feel aggrieved at intrusion by the KWP, especially KWP Central Military Committee Vice Chairman Ch'oe Ryong-hae into KPA matters, but there have not been any indications of organized opposition. If anything, the re-promotion to general and subsequent appointment of hardliner Kim Kyök-sik to Minister of Defense, replacing Kim Chöng-gak who was appointed president of Kim Il-sung University, would indicate that the top officers, especially those over 70, are for the most part falling in line or pushed into retirement. Some 30 percent of KPA officers over 70 have been replaced via promotions of those in their 40s-50s.²⁹ Despite some sensational and unconfirmed media reports of possible coups and massive disgruntlement, these promotions seem to be part of an established strategy for testing and promoting loyalty. Many “princelings” or children of both KWP and KPA elites, including O Küng-ryöl's son O Se-hyön, have been playing prominent roles in various positions.³⁰

Thus, longtime mainstays, such as O Küng-ryöl, who according to some observers had been competing with Chang Söng-t'aek to attract funds from overseas Koreans in China during the last days of Kim Jong-il's rule, has been relegated into the background.³¹ Other prominent KPA officials, including the four KPA officers who accompanied Kim Jong-il's hearse at the funerary procession on December 28, 2011 has been removed from their positions or relegated to second line positions. Aside from Kim Chöng-gak mentioned above, U Tong-ch'ük has not appeared in public since March 2012, while Yi Yöng-ho (Ri Yong-ho) was removed from all posts in a widely reported move in July 2012. Kim Yöng-ch'un remains on the roster of public visiting delegations, although listed after Ch'oe Ryong-hae. Other demotions have included Kim Yöng-ch'öl, who South Korean intelligence had identified along with Kim Kyök-sik as one of the leaders of the shelling of Yöngp'yöngdo, from general to colonel, and Hyön Yöng-ch'öl, Chief of General Staff and ostensibly Yi Yöng-ho's successor, from Vice Marshall to General.³²

In addition to personnel demotions and promotions, the reorganization of economic units within the KPA indicates that Kim Jong-un has been able to strengthen his control over the

military. The KPA's overseas economic activities unit, known as Room 39, was reportedly closed in August 2012 soon after Yi Yöng-ho's dismissal from all posts, and Room 38, the KWP's unit that acted as the Kim Family's “personal safe,” was closed in October 2012.³³ At the same time, gifts to the selectocracy in both the KPA and the KWP in the form of Swiss watches (Victorinox) and designer goods apparently continue to be sent out, as do other material incentives such as preferential access to food and housing.

Some observers claim that the shift in the power equilibrium from the KPA to the KWP and the Cabinet will destabilize the country. This assertion appears to be based in part on the assumption that North Korea had been under Kim Jong-il a military-run state. The “Military First” politics and the 2009 Constitutional Revision defining the National Defense Commission as the representative of the country in Article 109, item 1, would at first glance appear to support this view.³⁴ However, the objective in the Constitutional Revisions had not been to militarize the country but to allow the KPA to function more effectively within the national system.³⁵ Furthermore, KWP, the Central Committee and Central Administrative Committee (Chöngmuwön), which became the “Cabinet” in 1998, were also elevated in status along with the National Defense Commission during each Constitutional revision in 1992, 1998, and 2009, meaning that while the power had shifted to the KPA, even under “Military First” politics, the country was never merely a “military state.”³⁶ Conversely, the adjustment of the power equilibrium towards greater weight given the Party and the Cabinet does not mean the desiccation of KPA either, as evinced by the recent reports of possible missile tests and Kim Jong-un's repeated visits to military facilities.

4. Foreign Policy Diversifications

Diversification in the realm of foreign and security policy have, like domestic political reforms, been based on the tactics used by Kim Jong-il, with the primary goal appearing to be maintaining equilibrium between external tensions and international outreach. The speed and scope of the activities again would indicate that these diversifications are part of a calculated mix rather than random moves from a regime with an uncertain immediate political future.

On one hand, North Korea has increased its cultural and sports exchanges. Among other examples, North Korea agreed to send



an athlete to the Paralympics in November 2010, and in fact sent its first athlete to the September 2012 London Paralympics.³⁷ A North Korean film, *Comrade Kim Flying* (a joint production between North Korean, British and Belgian teams that began four years ago), was shown at the Pusan International Film Festival in September 2012, while *A Promise in Pyongyang*, a joint Chinese-North Korean production, was released in China and North Korea in June 2012, and shown in South Korea in November 2012. The Unhasu Orchestra joined the Radio France Philharmonic for a series of concerts in March 2012 under the baton of the renowned South Korean conductor Chung Myung-Whun, and Munich Philharmonic visited Pyongyang and performed concerts with North Korean counterparts in November 2012. A semi-pro basketball delegation of Americans visited Pyongyang in June 2012, and a Japanese taekwondo team visited Pyongyang in November 2012.

Multiple visits to Southeast Asian countries through the summer of 2012 appear to draw inspiration in part from initiatives undertaken in 2002-3 to diversify sources of capital, food, and technology. Around 2002, North Korea shifted from pursuing exchanges in Southeast Asia based on ideological affinity to the non-aligned movement to estimations of economic benefits.³⁸ North Korea appears to be well aware of the economic growth rates registered by countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, and the fact that trade with ASEAN countries had declined from around 10 percent of the total value during 2000-2006 to 2 percent in 2011.³⁹ Investments into Rajin, increased trade in goods and technology, and food aid were the main points of discussion raised by the head of the delegations, Kim Yŏng-nam, the long-serving chair of the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly and experienced foreign policy hand. Agreements to increase media and economic exchanges were concluded with Malaysia, whose goal of expanding the Global Movement of Moderates (promoting engagement and moderation in international relations) appears to intersect with Pyongyang's aims to diversify sources of funds and food.⁴⁰ On the heels of a 2-0 loss in a friendly soccer game with the North Korean national team in September, Indonesia pledged \$2 million in food aid.⁴¹ In October, North Korea also launched a campaign to attract more tourists from Taiwan and the Philippines.⁴²

The key of course is not to treat these events in isolation. In October and November alone, North Korea claimed that its missiles could reach the US mainland, announced a state of semi-war alert, Kim Jong-un bestowed honors to soldiers who had participated in the shelling of Yŏnp'yŏngdo, and threatened

to shell the island again if military exercises were carried out by the South on the anniversary of the shelling.⁴³ Aside from such incidents or concerns about missile tests, North Korean capture of Chinese fishing boats in May has only served to increase the number of observers in China calling for a reassessment of the China-North Korea relationship.⁴⁴

North Korea has also been tracking with great concern South Korea's acquisition of the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) surface-to-air guided missile defense system from initial discussions to final purchase.⁴⁵ Again, rather than dismiss some of the operatic protests about the US-South Korean military as paranoid ranting, it would be useful to note that there appear to be clear strategic concerns, as well as propoganda value, in criticizing the US and South Korea when compared with the fact that there have been no North Korean criticisms of Indonesia's standing order of sixteen T-50 Golden Eagle supersonic light fighter planes manufactured by South Korea. Moving missile components from the research center to the testing site, and announcing a test launch for sometime in mid-December, possibly days before the South Korean presidential election, is another indication that the use of both provocations and outreach is likely to continue.

North Korea's relations with Syria also indicate that diversification of foreign relations and mix of tension and outreach will likely remain for the foreseeable future. The discovery of missile parts (445 graphite cylinders) from North Korea on a Chinese ship that was headed to Syria and widely reported statements from Kim Jong-un in support of Bashir Al Assad certainly does nothing to improve North Korea's image abroad.⁴⁶ From North Korea's perspective, Syria is ideologically aligned with its message of autonomy and anti-US imperialism and also one of the few oil-producing countries other than China willing to engage in trade, especially for missile parts. Articles introducing Syria's oil production trends and IT industries accompanied the arrival of a Syrian delegation in North Korea October 29, and soon after, an agreement to increase economic cooperation and exchanges was announced on November 5, 2012.⁴⁷ On October 5, 2012, the 67th anniversary of the founding of the KWP, Bashir Al Assad sent a congratulatory message to Kim Jong-un, which was reciprocated in the more widely reported statement from Kim Jong-un on November 16 congratulating Syria on the commemoration of what North Korea called Syria's "rectification movement," the rise to power of Hagez Al Assad, Bashir Al Assad's father in November 1970.⁴⁸



As for the Six-Party Talks and nuclear weapons, suffice it to say that there are no indications of any immediate or significant changes. If anything, the widely reported amendment to the Constitution in 2011 that included a reference to its being a “nuclear power state” makes it even clearer that North Korea has little interest in giving up its nuclear weapons program. North Korea continues to call for recognition as a nuclear state along with the US, Russia, Britain, France, and China, and there is also little likelihood that this will be forthcoming in *de jure* terms. North Korea will continue to be the object of scrutiny and monitoring as the only one of the non Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) recognized nuclear states with an openly adversarial relationship with the US, and especially so as it is unlikely to follow the “Pakistan solution” and join the war on terror. The Libyan civil war and the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi merely reinforced North Korea’s belief that possession of nuclear weapons, even with vexed delivery technologies, is a key not only to national identity but a deterrent to external intervention.⁴⁹ The light water nuclear reactor currently under construction and the possibilities of another missile launch in December merely confirm that cultural exchanges and diplomatic maneuvers will continue to be accompanied by military activities, a strategy that has been in place since the 1960s.

5. Economic Adjustments

As other papers in this series have focused on the economic dimensions of North Korea under Kim Jong-un, the discussion in this section will be brief.⁵⁰ While absolute poverty does not invariably lead to regime or state collapse, and perceptions of relative poverty in North Korea can be dampened by various ideological and speech controls, the reality remains that for the stationary bandit or stationary missionary, there need to be people to exploit or convert, meaning people will need food if not cars. Kim Jong-un indirectly acknowledged this when in the equivalent of an inauguration speech on April 15, 2012 he pledged to work on behalf of the people.⁵¹ Of course, the latest reports from 2012 all indicate malnutrition is still prevalent despite improved harvests this past summer.⁵² The Public Distribution System (PDS), had always covered only around 70 percent of the total population, and clearly differentiated between the ranks in terms of frequency, volume, quality, and variety of food distribution, but has deteriorated in the past year according to recent refugee/defector accounts.⁵³ Reports from within the country indicate that corn was distributed until April, then starting in May supplies of corn was

reduced to 20 days-worth, and by August and September only 15 days of each month.⁵⁴

Recognition of course does not lead to success. Investments in Rajin or reopening Kumgangsan to South Korean tourists, opening new perfume factories and supermarkets generate revenues and can be useful for official propaganda, but the actual total economic growth rate at this point is less important than basic health and food supply.⁵⁵ While the military first rhetoric (albeit under KWP supervision) has been retained in formalistic terms, in substance, the state has shifted its focus to the economic reform under the KWP and Cabinet leadership. As was the case with the 7.1 economic reforms of 2002, the 6.28 economic reforms focused on agriculture did not appear in official documents and the majority of assessments of their potential effectiveness veer towards the skeptical.⁵⁶

Attitudes may have changed since the late-1990s when the eldest son Kim Jong-nam had his initial fall out with Kim Jong-il over the pace and direction of economic reforms.⁵⁷ Small groups of economics professors from North Korean universities are studying market principles outside of the country, and have benchmarked cases such as China, Vietnam, and Singapore. It would be judicious to temper expectations of a Chinese-style set of reforms, however. The basic political and economic structure remains, and has not been revised. The bulk of North Korea’s economic research still leans towards the theoretical, largely examining Soviet-derived centrally planned distribution theories called “economic cybernetics” or System of Optimally Functioning Socialist Economy (SOFE).⁵⁸ A survey of recent studies of South Korea’s economy by academics in North Korea indicated that the analysis invariably praised socialist approaches to economics and invoked the stereotype of South Korea as a vassal to the US and Japan, thereby reaffirming the superiority of North Korea’s *chuch’e*-based economic system.⁵⁹ While the field of economics and policy probably intersect less frequently than might be expected in most countries, there is little indication that the underlying problems related to planned economies has been acknowledged in North Korean academic or policy-making circles.

Regardless of the extent to which Chang Sŏng-t’aek was shocked when he visited South Korea in 2002 and observed first-hand the results of decades of sustained development and growth, in all likelihood, North Korea will continue to hew closer to the lower edge of the acceptable bandwidth of performance



in economic terms, meaning food shortages and malnutrition will likely remain, especially in the northeastern rural areas, and the economy will remain heavily dependent on China. Around 90 percent of all North Korea's trade is with China, although China's trade with South Korea is far greater in volume and market value. North Korea's role as a strategic buffer and a link in China's "Revitalize the Northeast campaign" (Zhenxing Dongbei lao gongye jidi) will likely mean continued efforts by North Korea to find alternative sources of funds and aid while at the same time strengthening national and local level economic linkages with China.⁶⁰

Conclusion

In studying North Korea's political stability, there needs to be a separation from normative and sometimes wishful thinking and analysis. North Korea, from a normative and prescriptive view, ought to improve its human rights conditions and the food security of all its citizens, but this is quite a different claim than analyzing what the North Korean state can do in terms of capacity, and what it should do if its own goal is long-term regime survival and stability. All too often, quantitative analyses reproduce media reports that can be presented without context, and more grounded approaches can become distracted by the mesmerizing minutia of life in North Korea.

There is precious little information on the interpersonal dynamic between the what looks to be current core three individuals in power – Kim Jong-un, Chang Sŏng-t'aek, and Ch'oe Ryong-hae, and some media observers have claimed that Chang would attempt a palace overthrow in the near future. While acknowledging that as always, information on some key elements of North Korean politics remains adamantly opaque, available information indicates that Kim Jong-un has undertaken a wide range of policy initiatives largely based on established templates used by Kim Il-sun and Kim Jong-il, and has carried out personnel changes at an unprecedented pace while clearly differentiating his style of rule from his father's. The speed, scale, scope, and variety of policies in North Korea's moves to distract, mobilize, and control its citizens, tame and turn over its selectocracy, and diversify its foreign and security policies all indicate that the totalitarian combination of high oppression and high loyalty will likely remain. This is all the more likely as despite the pace of changes, awareness of past practices is very much evident, and equilibrium between mass distraction and mass starvation, overreliance on the KPA or the KWP, and conflicts with external threats and exchanges with others has been maintained, albeit to varying degrees of effectiveness in each policy area. Consequently, projecting political stability for at least the next five years would seem to be a reasonable conclusion.

Endnotes

Romanization of Korean is based on McCune-Reischauer, Japanese on Revised Hepburn, and Chinese on Hanyu Pinyin systems. The exceptions are for names commonly spelled in alternative Romanization systems (e.g. Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il, Tokyo, Pyongyang, Yonhap, Kyodo, etc.).

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