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North Korea after Kim Jong Il: The Kim Jong Un era and its challenges□□金正日後の北朝鮮―金正恩時代とその直面する難題

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Topics:

From cheers to jeers: North Korea in the media

Austria is a great country for many reasons, but with just 8.4 million citizens and locked in the center of the European continent, it is hardly a global player. However, even here the death of Kim Jong Il, the details of the mourning procedure, and the assignment of titles and functions to his son Kim Jong Un, were reported by almost all media as top news.

This tells us something about globalization and our own profession. News is being produced and fed by a few globally operating press agencies that make hundreds of national media outlets look like clones with minor local mutations. It also shows how visually oriented the consumption of news has become. We have reason to believe that without the particular features of Kim Jong Il's appearance, and without the TV broadcasts of thousands of ecstatic mourners [Erich Weingartner: The reality of tears], attention in the West would have been much lower. I was asked by one journalist why our public does not seem to be too worried about the humanitarian situation in North Korea. My answer was: because they cannot see it on their TV screens.

By now, to most of our fellow countrymen in Austria, in Europe, in the United States or elsewhere, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un have become just a distant memory, another blip in a constant flow of dramatic events. Much more substantial issues like the drama in Fukushima have already faded away and seem like a thing from a long bygone past. The public in the neighboring countries like South Korea, Japan and China will be more attentive, but even there, the initial excitement is diminishing.

In any case, the media party is over, and so is the hangover. Countless interviews have been given and hasty commentaries written. Public interest in the West vanishes, but things do not stop taking shape in North Korea. A new myth is in the making, and we can observe it in real time. Countless important signals have been sent in just two weeks. They form the foundation of what might be a short-lived intermezzo between a monolithic state and its transformation, or a shaping of the North Korean system for the next decades. The successor has been announced, he has made his first steps and public appearances. New buzzwords have emerged in the mass media, new rituals and icons are appearing, and the first New Year joint editorial of Kim Jong Un's North Korea has been published.

In other words, we still know too little, but we know more than on Dec. 19th, the day when Kim Jong Il's death was officially announced. It is thus time to take stock of what happened, of what we know, and of what we don't know. This remains a complicated endeavor, and educated

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guessing is often the best we can hope for. I therefore begin with a short but necessary excurse into methodology.

What does it take to be a North Korea expert?

This was on the smarter side of questions I was asked during my own media speed battle around Dec. 19th. It is no doubt a valid one, given the amazing discrepancies between questions and knowledge, and between actual expertise and the number of experts. Having worked on North Korea for over 20 years now, my answer is this: There is no single factor; rather, it is a *combination* of a few components that makes a good North Korea expert.

(1) Use common sense. After all, North Koreans are human beings and can thus be understood as such. It takes no rocket science to see that they need food, shelter and all the other elements of the basic levels of Maslow's pyramid of needs [link].

(2) Make use of universal knowledge and meta-theories. Sometimes we become victims of our own propaganda and forget that despite its particularities, North Korea is a state in Northeast Asia. It has a government, a leadership, an economy, a people and a history. No specific expertise is needed to understand that survival is the regime's key goal, and hardly any realist would have difficulties explaining North Korea's foreign policy. But strangely, these simple facts are often either ignored or lauded as deep insights. It is not enough to know Korea; knowing your social science is imperative to avoid amateurism. American scholars, among others, have impressively demonstrated what can be learned about North Korea that way.

(3) Know the system. North Korea is not the only place in the world where state socialism has been practiced. As a minimum, one should be informed about the functioning and the effects of a one-party state, systematic repression, a state-owned economy, a non-convertible currency, central planning, or the absence of competition and markets. Actual experience of having lived (in my case often frustrated, but also surprisingly happily) under such conditions is even more helpful. It is no coincidence that Russian names appear so high in the ranks of the most knowledgeable North Korea scholars.

(4) Know Korea. Common sense, meta-theories and systemic knowledge will get us far, but not far enough. After all, North Korea is (North) Korea, with a history that has led to a unique set of institutions also known as culture, customs, values, and traditions. Uncritically applying our own cultural and moral standards as a yardstick will often lead to more or less significant misunderstandings. True, cultural determinism is an extreme that needs to be avoided; but so should ignorance. This is why South Korean scholars, and Chinese experts of Korean origin, are able to offer particularly deep insights.

(5) Know your sources. Yes, the amount of foreign language materials on North Korea is increasing, and one can communicate with North Koreans or defectors through an interpreter. But if you agree that a proper understanding and appreciation, not to speak of expert knowledge of Shakespeare's pieces requires command of English, then you will agree that Korean is indispensable for studying the inner workings of the North Korean system. That's why Koreanists often have a competitive advantage in particular in the understanding of subtle messages.

(6) Commit yourself. It takes time and a long-term effort to develop experience, the ability to see what is extraordinary, and to understand the background and the context of events. This is why students of any subject are required to read more than just one book, and why learning is said to be life-long. As dreadful as it often is, only a long-term reading of propaganda will let

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you see what is hidden between the lines (to discard this as Kremlinology reminds me of Aesop's tale of the fox and the grapes). The same applies to travelling. First-time visitors to North Korea often feel like Columbus, discovering "new" things everywhere that have been seen and reported dozens of times before. Even if they can avoid that trap, they get just a static image, a snap-shot. Only going to the same places again and again will let you notice significant developments.

In addition to these six points, one could think of other factors such as the command of Russian, Chinese or Japanese to have access to valuable secondary sources. Being as free as possible of positive or negative emotions is also helpful to minimize biases.

It is admittedly very difficult to find all these criteria combined in one person. The list above looks more like an outline of the various approaches taken to North Korea. Maybe that is why none of us can seriously claim to possess superior knowledge or full understanding. But I would nevertheless argue that the above is the ideal that we should strive to get as close to as possible.

With this in mind, what do we know about the recent events in North Korea, and what can be said about its future? I will structure my remarks according to questions I received, and statements that I encountered. The six points above shall serve as an implicit guideline. Your topic of interest is not included? Drop us a comment!

Q&A on Kim Jong Un's North Korea

Does Kim Jong Un have the power, and will he keep it?

Common sense is a bit at a loss here. He is the son of Kim Jong Il, but only the third son. North Korea is not a monarchy, but we nevertheless witness a third-generation succession. Kim Jong Un has been announced as the successor and assigned a leading role, but he is very young and inexperienced. This list of contradictory statements can be continued, so it is better to turn to a more structured analysis.

Gregory Henderson's study of Korean politics suggests that the emergence of alternative centers of power is relatively unlikely [Gregory Henderson (1968): Korea. The Politics of the Vortex. Harvard University Press]. Rather, we can expect various individuals and groups to compete for control of the center, which is formed by or around Kim Jong Un. At his young age and with only a short grooming period, he will have to rely on others to maintain and expand his power. Before Kim Jong Il's death, Karoly Fendler, an insightful veteran Hungarian diplomat with decades of experience in North Korea, in a private conversation with the author suggested a triumvirate: Kim Jong Il and his son responsible for army and ideology, Kim Yong Nam for protocol, and Choe Yong Rim for the economy. This makes sense in many ways. Yoram Barzel in his study on dictatorships points out that any dictator "must form long-term relations with at least some of his subjects to secure their cooperation". [Barzel, Yoram (1968): The State and the Diversity of Third Party Enforcers. mimeo, University of Washington, p. 8]

So Kim Jong Un will share power, but he is also needed by the system as a single leader. Brian Myers shows that Koreans seem to have a certain preference for a parental leader and, most importantly, that the state as such shows no signs of undergoing a legitimacy crisis [Myers, Brian R.: North Korea's State-Loyalty Advantage. Journal of International Affairs, Fall/Winter 2011, Vol. 65, No. 1., pp. 115-129]. Along the same line, Cheong Seong-chang argues that instead of a collective leadership, we will see the emergence of another single-person leadership system under Kim Jong Un. [정성장: 2012년 북한 정세 전망, 정세와 정책 2012년1월호, link]

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My own assessment is slightly different. True: now that the power vacuum left after the death of Kim Jong Il has been so quickly and massively filled with Kim Jong Un, he will be the man in the spotlight. But at least for the next few years, he will not have the capacity to control the country without having to rely heavily on support by powerful individuals. This, however, is risky. I agree with Andrei Lankov who expects a power struggle in NK, one level below KJU: "…we might soon witness advisors and officials jockeying for power behind the throne and their struggle may become quite violent". [link]

In fact, I believe that the hasty efforts at elevating Kim Jong Il posthumously to the same status as his father Kim Il Sung might come too late. They are the only choice the leadership thought it had after the sudden death of its top man, but it is only the second best option. Kim Jong Il knew very well why he avoided a real take-over during his lifetime. His legitimacy was built almost exclusively on being the sole prophet of his towering father Kim Il Sung. As such, he was accepted and untouchable. Kim Jong Il had very good reasons not to erect any statues of himself, and not to give his name to streets, plazas etc.

The country of Kim Il Sung - this is what most North Koreans, as defectors confirm - subscribe to with little hesitation. Kim Il Sung has liberated the country from the Japanese and won a shining victory against American aggression in the Korean War. This is what people have been told, this is what they believe, this is what in their view granted Kim Il Sung every right to govern the country that he singlehandedly created and protected. Not least, he had his old guard of loyal followers around him, and I mean really loyal as they had gone through all kinds of ordeals together ever since the days of the Minsaengdan incident, a massive purge of Koreans in the Chinese revolutionary forces in the early 1930s when they were suspected of being agents of the Japanese [Hongkoo Han (1999): *Wounded nationalism: The Minsaengdan incident and Kim Il Sung in Eastern Manchuria*, Seattle: University of Washington]. Parts of this old guard were alive and in control in 1994. But time took its toll. Their places have meanwhile been taken by the next, much better educated generation that grew up under more regular conditions. Now even the third generation is ready, career-oriented children of apparatchiks. Can they replicate the Kapsan faction's unconditional, grim personal loyalty? Or is their primary concern the preservation of the system that has formed them and that they benefit from? Make no mistake, both forms of loyalty can have the same result, i.e. support of the leader. But the latter form is open to alternatives.

For two decades since the mid 1970s, Kim Jong Il was promoted as the only person in the world who could fully grasp the wisdom of Kim Il Sung, who joined him on his numerous journeys through the country, who learned from him (or should it be Him?), who assisted him, and who then humbly continued his work. Kim Jong Il's position after 1994 was weaker than that of his father, but he could convincingly claim to be the only logical choice for the continuation of a path and leadership that was largely undisputed and beyond any doubt. And he could count on the old guard to support him.

One does not need to be a North Korea expert to understand that the same degree of legitimacy simply cannot be passed on to Kim Jong Un. Kim Jong Il did not fight against Japan, but he was at least (allegedly) born at Mt. Paektu. Kim Jong Il for a long time in his career was a moon, not a sun. He shone because Kim Il Sung was shining on him, and he reflected his light. This was part of the "text", as Brian Myers calls it. But how can a moon illuminate the next generation as brightly as a sun could?

The trouble is that even dictators need

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legitimacy. The logical choice would have been to enshrine the two eternal leaders, father Kim Il Sung and son Kim Jong Il, forever and create a system that would claim to fulfill their legacy in the most perfect way. This would require a collective of trustees with a *primus inter pares* at their helm, very much like China's Central Committee and the Party's General Secretary, or the Catholic Church and the Pope. God and Jesus, Allah and Mohammed, Lenin and Stalin - religion and history know many relatively successful cases where after only one successor, a new collective mode of leadership was chosen.

However, Kim Jong Il's untimely death means that a backup plan is now being implemented - hastily, massively, too quickly. Suddenly we hear about Kim Jong Il country, about the need to erect statues to his honor, about Kim Jong Un being Kim Jong Il, about Kim Jong Un being the supreme leader of the Party, the state, and the military. But will this be enough? The North Korean population does not consist of mindless robots. They are well educated, and they are tough. The elite have acquired self-confidence and power in the last years. They know their country has problems. They desperately want a solution. And so far they have little reason to believe that Kim Jong Un is the right man for the job.

How is Kim Jong Un's legitimacy being built?

Any leader, in any political system, needs legitimacy to maintain his claim to power. Not incidentally did Max Weber [Weber, Max (1972): Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, p. 122] suggest use of the claim to legitimacy as the sole criterion for classifying various types of rule. It would be outright naive to expect that all it takes in North Korea is an article in the Rodong Sinmun, and everyone will stop asking questions and just follow the new top man.

Legitimacy in autocratic systems is a tricky issue. It is hard to acquire, and it lacks a mechanism of permanent renewal (like elections in democracies). Merkel [Wolfgang Merkel (1999). Systemtransformation. Opladen, Germany: Leske+Budrich, pp. 25-28] associates North Korea with the Communist-totalitarian subtype, not with a monarchy. Bursens and Sinardet [Peter Bursens and Dave Sinardet, Democratic Legitimacy in Multilevel Political Systems: The European Union and Belgium in Comparative Perspective. Paper presented at the European Union Studies Association 11th Biennial International Conference, May 23-25, 2007, Los Angeles] show that there are two interrelated sides to legitimacy. In addition to the expected outcomes, an important source of legitimacy seems to be that the decision-making process including the selection of the leadership follows approved rules.

My own research confirms that legitimacy in North Korea is performance-based, and that this includes a certain compliance with rules and formalities. This is why Kim Jong Un is still addressed with the title Vice Chairman of the WPK Central Military Commission. This is why the eldest son Kim Jong Nam is so obviously unqualified for the post: he does not behave in a way that would be regarded as sufficiently dignified. On a side note, my suspicion is that he did so purposefully: what is better than being the offspring of a rich and powerful family, without the burden of actual government and the permanent power struggle behind the scenes? What a smart decision.

As indicated above, Kim Il Sung based his claim to power on his feats including the liberation of Korea from the Japanese, and the victory in a war of defense of Korea against an invasion by the United States. As so often, what matters is not the actual truth of such claims, but their perception by the target group, i.e. the North Korean population. Kim Jong Il, too, had to earn the right to rule. He was given a number of tasks to prove that he was capable. This included most prominently work in the film

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studios and the development of the chuch'e ideology as the country's guiding principle. He went through a rather long period of training and grooming before he was designated as successor at the 6th Party Congress in 1980. Ever since, he was portrayed as a tireless worker on behalf of the people. Take for example a 1980 painting shown at the North Korean art exhibition in Vienna in 2010, titled: The endlessly burning light of the Party Center (a codeword for Kim Jong Il at that time).

Another example shows him caring for the livelihood of soldiers:

But what about Kim Jong Un? He had little time to accomplish any major feat, or claim to have done so, although there are unproven rumors that he was involved in a number of military operations vis-à-vis South Korea. We could thus in the days after the announcement of Kim Jong Il's death observe a massive, multi-layered strategy to build at least a provisional legitimacy for Kim Jong Un. I can only agree with Ken Gause's assesment: "the regime appears to have launched a blitz campaign to portray him as the legitimate successor to his father, removing any doubt within the mind of the public and elite alike over who is in charge" [link].

It started with the inclusion of him as the "great successor" in the official obituary. The very moment North Koreans learned that Kim Jong Il was dead, they were also told who was going to be his heir. Note that Kim Jong Un had not been announced to be in that position during Kim Jong Il's lifetime; it was the Party who acted as the Kingmaker [link]. Even the introduction of Kim Jong Un to the public was done in the context of a Party Conference [link].

Then, a sense of guilt was instilled in the people. The very circumstances of Kim Jong Il's demise on the way to another on-the-spot guidance suggested that he worked himself to death for the people. The appropriate reaction is reported by none other than the Associated Press, which was told by the Vice Minister of Mining Industry Pak Thae Gu: "We lost the great Kim Jong Il because we did not do our work well. How can we have a rest?" [The Guardian, 01.01.2012, link]. This theme - which is Korean, not North Korean - was repeated a couple of times in KCNA and Rodong Sinmun reporting. Particularly noteworthy was the regret expressed by citizens about having failed to erect a statue of Kim Jong Il during his lifetime. We can expect Kim Jong Un to take up this task very soon.

Next came portrayals of Kim Jong Un's caring love for the people. Two examples stood out: the provision of fresh fish to the citizens of Pyongyang, and the provision of hot drinks for mourners [장군님께서 오시였다!, link] (some

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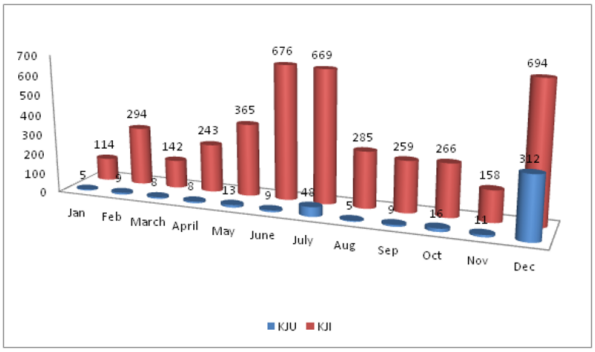
interesting details regarding North Korea's middle class that emerged in related reporting will be discussed below). This was mixed with references to Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un being one inseparable entity. In principle, this is very much the procedure followed through a generation earlier, when the transfer of legitimacy from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il took place.

Over the next days, Kim Jong Un was assigned various titles and functions. The functions included: successor to the revolutionary cause of Juche (주체혁명위업의 계승자), standing at the helm of the Korean revolution, the head (수반) of the WPK Central Committee, the Great Sun of the 21st Century (21세기의 태양), reputable leader of our Party, State and Army (우리 당과 국가, 군대의 영명한 령도자), supreme leader (최고령도자) of Party, state and army, and supreme commander of the Korean People's Army. The latter, interestingly, was announced to have happened before Kim Jong Il's death on Oct. 8th, 2011.

However, the only formal title he holds and that is repeated constantly is that of Vice Chairman of the WPK Central Military Commission (조선로동당 중앙군사위원회 부위원장). By early January 2012, the title "Dear respected Comrade Kim Jong Un" (경애하는 김정은동지) has become a standard form of address.

All this was an ad hoc reaction. A look at the frequency of KCNA reporting about Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un in the table below reveals that the departure of the leader was unexpected for the North Korean propaganda machine. With the exception of July, the average monthly number of articles with Kim Jong Un's name was less than 10 until November 2011, as opposed to over 300 for Kim Jong Il. The total number of such appearances in 2011 until November was 141 for Kim Jong Un and 3471 for Kim Jong Il. This suggests that the campaign to promote Kim Jong Un has not even remotely been in full swing.



Number of KCNA articles with the names of Kim Jong Un and Kim Jong Il, Jan.-Dec. 2011 (not weighted)

We have other indications that the succession was unexpected and ill-prepared. It seems there weren't even enough of the classic father-and-son pictures taken, a motive we have known from Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Take the stamps issued on Dec. 30th, 2011. One of them shows an image of Kim Jong Un with his father during a field inspection against the backdrop of the revolution's sacred Mt. Paektu. The Korea Times writes that this image is an attempt at justifying the third-generation hereditary transfer of power [Korea Times, 31.12.2011, link]. It is hard to object; what I find remarkable, however, is the obvious and hasty editing that has taken place (others are erased, Kim Jong Un is moved closer to his father, shadows remain intact). If this is such a central element in building Kim Jong Un's legitimacy, why hasn't the propaganda machine produced dozens of father-and-son pictures in time?

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Do the Party and the military compete for power in North Korea?

This is one of the most commonly made assumptions about power in North Korea: that the military and the party compete. Our minds seem to have a general inclination towards simple dichotomies: good and evil, black and white, civilians and military, yin and yang, sweet and sour, man and woman and so forth. I am afraid that this predisposition is responsible for a great deal of the popularity of the "military versus party" theory. To put it very bluntly: I disagree.

The reasons for this are manifold. To begin with, it is hard to imagine that a reasonable dictator would allow the military to become a political force in his country. He will use the military as a tool, he will stress military values like hierarchy, obedience of orders, and self-sacrifice. All socialist societies that we have known used militant language (the economic front, shock brigade, fresh advance, speed-battle, struggle etc.). They all had large militaries, huge budgets (alas, this is what eventually broke their economies' backs), para-military training, a preference for uniforms, mass rallies and marches. Leonid Brezhnev often wore a military uniform, and he was surrounded by Generals.

I spent five years as a child in his Soviet Union in the 1970s. Despite my German parents' disapproval, I grew up there playing military games, reading military stories, watching military movies, and wearing a school uniform. Each year, the Red Square in Moscow hosted military parades of a scale that easily let anything we have seen in Pyongyang pale in comparison. Tanks, artillery, gigantic missiles and goose-stepping soldiers were passing by an embalmed Lenin. Still, few observers would have characterized the Soviet Union as a country ruled *by* the military. Ruled *through* the military, maybe, but not a military dictatorship.

North Korea is admittedly an extreme case; but it iw not unique. Part of our perception problem is that since 1991, it is the only such system that is left. Many of those who today watch parades on Kim Il Sung square have no memory of any similar case and easily think that nothing like this has existed on earth before. Well, wrong. Extreme, North-Koreanized: yes. But unique: no.

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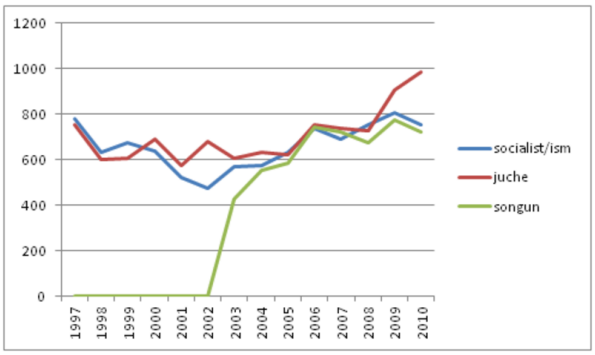
Most seasoned observers of North Korea agree that the country is ruled by a kleptocracy. It consists of a few families, including the one of Kim Il Sung and of those 50 comrades who entered the country with him in late 1945. This top elite has had seven decades to settle in. It assumed control of all positions of power, be it the Party, the military, the security organs, the state, or the parliament. They intermarried, they produced offspring, they expanded. This is in no way unique. In medieval Europe, it was common to marry within the aristocracy, to have at least one son becoming a knight, and another a cleric. In North Korea, it is the same families that control the Party and the military. If there is any rivalry, and we have no reason to believe that there is none, it will be between the families, not between the institutions. It will be army units against army units, Party leaders against Party leaders, ministries against ministries; not army against Party.

Another fact that seems hard to grasp for Westerners is that the glue that holds North Korea together is not direct repression, but ideology. This is not to say that North Korea is not a highly repressive system; of course it is. This repression is systemic, and it is omnipresent. But it is not the only and probably not even the most powerful element of regime stability. It is no coincidence that Kim Jong Il identified ideological weakness as the reason for the collapse of socialism in Europe [link]. And indeed, North Korea is particularly strong in this respect. It has successfully merged anti-Japanese and anti-American nationalism, the fear to again lose independence, a crude type of Leninism, xenophobia (Myers calls this racism) and traditional familism into one.



Use of key ideological terms in KCNA articles, 1997-2010 (weighted and rounded)

Source: author's own calculations, based on www.kcna.co.jp

As the graph above shows, the use of typical North Korean orthodox and conservative terminology, exemplified by the words "socialism" and "juche", has declined after 2000 but picked up since 2005. The new term "songun" was added in 2003 and developed in line with the other terms. All three have developed more or less in parallel throughout most of the observation period, with correlation coefficients [We use Pearson's Product Moment Correlation, also known as Person's r. Values for r range from +1 to -1. A correlation of +1 means that there is a perfect positive linear relationship between variables, 0 indicates no correlation, and -1 implies a perfect negative linear relationship.] ranging from r=0.7 to as much as r=0.9 for socialism/songun in the 2004-2010 period. In 2010, however, we see a slight drop year-on-year of the use of "socialism" and "songun", but an increase in the nationalist term "juche".

For the ordinary North Korean, the leader and socialism are the same as national independence and the nation. The latter are beyond any doubt, and so are automatically the former. And the owner of ideology is the Party. For reasons that are subject to speculation, the

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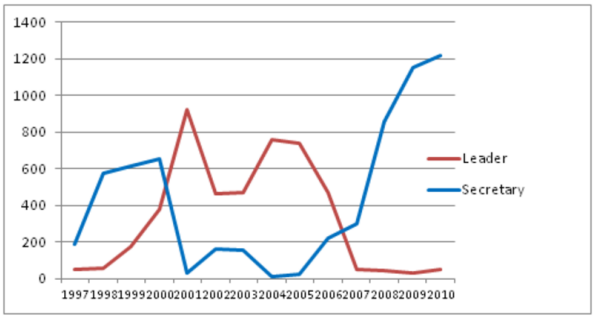
Party was pushed into the background for a while, but not by the military. Rather, it was the leader himself who after having solidified his position decided to put a check on this powerful institution. The graph below shows this; in 2000, Kim Jong Il almost stopped using his Party title for a few years, which coincide with a period of unfinished economic reform.



Use of key titles for Kim Jong Il in KCNA articles, 1997-2010 (weighted and rounded)

Source: author's own calculations, based on www.kcna.co.jp

For the period 1997-2010, we see a strongly negative correlation (r = -0.72) in the use of what we could classify as a worldly, management-oriented title (Great Leader, 위대한 령도자) and a spiritual, ideologically oriented title (Secretary General, 총비서). Two points stand out: the clear identification of the reform period 2001-2006, when the negative correlation gets close to perfect at r = -0.90, and the new heights the mentioning of Kim Jong Il in his function as the Party's General Secretary has reached since 2008, the year of his alleged stroke.

My interpretation in 2003 of the Military First Policy was not that of a radical turn towards militarism; how much more militaristic could North Korea become anyway? Rather, I suggested seeing it as the ideological component of a market-oriented economic reform drive that the Party obviously opposed [The End of Socialism and a Wedding Gift for the Groom? The True Meaning of the Military First Policy, NAPSNET Special Report and DPRK Briefing Book, Dec. 11th, 2003]. Then, in 2008, I noticed unusually enthusiastic reporting about the Party Foundation Monument [Has the Next North Korean Leader Been Announced?, Japan Focus, No. 43, 27.10.2008] and interpreted this as the expression of a decision on a new, collective leadership model. In 2010, the WPK experienced another significant formal upgrading of its role with the Party Conference, where its power organs were rejuvenated and its status was reconfirmed. Very recently, the WPK Central Committee even managed to squeeze itself into a slogan that for years existed without it: "Let's protect the Central Committee of the Party with Kim Jong Il as its head with our lives". The last time the formulation "the WPK Central Committee headed by Secretary Kim Jong Il" was used was in autumn 1997. It only reemerged on Sept. 29, 2010 in connection with the WPK Conference. In the 13 years in between, this and similar slogans were used without reference to the Central Committee.

Picture published by KCNA on the occasion of a troop visit by Kim Jong Il on Dec. 13th, 2011

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After Dec. 19th, the state media picked up this slogan and substituted Kim Jong Il by Kim Jong Un. On a side note, however, it seems that part of the country was lagging behind in the implementation of that change. On the picture below, published by KCNA on the occasion of one of the first troop visits by the new leader, Kim Jong Il's name was still there.

A strong signal regarding power in North Korea was sent through the very funeral held on Dec. 28th. Based on our stereotypical knowledge, what would we expect? Kim Jong Il, Great General, the man of the Military First Era era, would get a military ceremony with soldiers carrying his coffin, or would it be mounted on a gun carriage or even a tank? Well, none of this happened, as we know. The whole ceremony was largely civilian, except the salute shots.

Most important, however, is this. If a country's leader dies, wouldn't his body usually be wrapped in the national flag? Not in this case. Kim Jong Il's coffin was covered by the flag of mother Party. How much more do we need to understand where power resides in North Korea?

The Worker's Party controls the governmental institutions including economic and foreign policy, and it controls the military. This, too, is not at all an exception. Ever since Lenin took over power in the middle of the World War and thus could not afford disbanding the Tsarist army and killing its officers, political officers aka Commissars were put alongside military men down to the lower levels of military hierarchy in the Red Army. Each and every officer in East Germany's National People's Army was also a Party member who had two lines of command to follow. North Korea is no different.

In his analysis of the role of the Central Military Commission (CMC) since its establishment in 1962, Cheong Song-chang shows not only that the CMC has played a particular role within the Party structure, but also that the Party hierarchy has been superior to the military hierarchy. His analysis of the relationship between the Central Committee and the CMC, however, implies a power struggle within the Party, which makes sense in light of our above remarks on familism. [Cheong, Seong-chang: The Status and Role of the WPK Central Military Commission in the Kim Jong-il Era, Vantage Point, 11/2001, pp. 48-59]

If you look for a much more typical example of a military dictatorship, South Korea in 1961 would come to mind. A young general named Park Chung-hee assumed power through a coup, took off the uniform after a while but ruled the country with an iron fist while relying on his army networks. He was assassinated by his Intelligence Chief in 1979, only to be

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followed by two more generals, the last of whom ensured a smooth transition to a democracy after 1987. I believe that this experience compels many Korea watchers to apply a similar logic to North Korea. But despite the obvious militarism and the iron fisted rule, North Korea is not a military dictatorship; rather, it is an extreme case of a state-socialist autocracy in a constant state of emergency and under quasi-martial law.

How will China behave?

China is often portrayed in Western media as North Korea's only ally. This is hard to deny but it is only one side of the coin. History knows very few cases where the relationship between a gigantic and a small neighbor has been positive from the perspective of both sides. The two countries have a long tradition of close cooperation, but also of tensions and mistrust. In the 16th century, China was Korea's ally but only sent troops after Toyotomi Hideyoshi had occupied half of Korea. Elder brother China failed as Korea's protector in the late 19th century, which led to colonization by Japan. China came to the rescue of North Korea in the Korean War, but not entirely free of selfish concerns, and it stayed until the late 1950s. A coup against Kim Il Sung during a trip to Europe in 1956 was led by pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese Koreans. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Red Guards heavily criticized Kim Il Sung and his leadership style, and even tried to trigger a similar movement in North Korea. There were territorial conflicts involving, among others, the sacred Mt. Paektu. Beijing's claim that the ancient Kingdom of Koguryŏ was actually Chinese prompted outrage in both Koreas. The reforms in the neighboring country are met with a mix of fascination and suspicion, and China's obvious hyper-presence in today's North Korean economy worries many Koreans.

Given North Korea's nationalist ideology and its fear of external interference, China looks like more the biggest threat than the best friend. The massive economic dependence on China only supports that feeling of malaise. Yonhap News reported on Dec. 29th that in the first ten months of 2011, China's trade with North Korea jumped 73.5 percent year-on-year to reach a new record high of 4.67 billion US$ [link]. In particular, China increased its imports - anthracite coal, alloy and non-alloy steel - from North Korean by a whopping 124.8 percent last year. North Korea's trade reliance on China jumped from 25 percent in 1999 to 83 percent in 2011. The next largest trading partner in 2010 was Russia - with a mere 2.6% of the total! [KOTRA (2011): 2010 북한의 대외 무역 동향, KOTRA 자료 11-033, Seoul: KOTRA].

When I first visited North Korea in 1991, most foreign-made goods, if there were any, came from Japan. By contrast, in 2010, the whole country seemed to be flooded with Chinese goods of all types, from textiles to cars, repair shops, and restaurants.

Photo: Rudiger Frank 2010

The Pyongyang International Trade Fair was dominated by Chinese firms selling computers, home appliances, trucks and all other kinds of products. The few Western companies had only very humble presences. Mutual suspicion prevails. Chinese are still often called by the derogatory term 돼넘 in private conversations, while Chinese businessmen complained about

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the low willingness of their North Korean partners to adhere to contracts.

Officially, it is all friendship; just as it was between the Soviet Union and its satellite states. If you have a chance, ask a Hungarian or a Czech how they really felt about their Big Brother. I remember how "die Freunde" (the friends) was used in an openly ironic way when referring to Russians in East Germany. In 2010, the mass spectacle Arirang contained a full chapter only on 조중친성 (North Korea-China friendship). Here, too, the North Koreans could not refrain from issuing a side blow by showing a slogan from the Cultural Revolution: If there were no Communist Party, there would be no New China. This can be interpreted as indirectly accusing Beijing of having betrayed what Mao had fought for.

Photo: Rudiger Frank 2010

Be it true friendship or a rational alliance: In the context of its regional and global strategy, China is primarily interested in a stable North Korea. A collapse would bring Beijing into a complicated situation. If it sent in troops, this would trigger angry reactions worldwide and, in an instant, would discredit all of the past decade's painstaking attempts at portraying the giant's rise as peaceful. But if it just watched the existing order disintegrate, Korea would quickly be reunified under South Korean leadership, which means an expansion of the U.S. zone of influence right up until China's Northeastern border. This would be a strategic disaster. Not least, the thus proven inability to save a client state would drastically reduce the PRC's chances to convince any other smaller country to trade protection by Washington against protection by Beijing. Dreams to become a regional superpower would be set back. We should also not forget that the North Korean nuclear program can be used in various ways. Deterrence against China is not the most publicized option in our Western media, but that does not mean that Chinese are not nervous about this dangerous possession in the hands of its unruly neighbor.

It was therefore little surprise that China was quick to express support for the new leadership in North Korea. The Korea Development Institute on Jan. 1st, 2012, declared that it expects China to provide economic assistance to North Korea in the near future to help stabilize its socialist neighbor. [link]

We can also expect a continuation of the policy of the past years: Invitations to the leader and high level North Korean officials; tours of Shenyang, Beijing, and Shanghai; the building of personal networks with the North Korean elite; and patience. Only if Pyongyang is seen as going too far, for example in the nuclear question, will Beijing interfere - but as quietly as possible. Meanwhile, new economic zones will be built, old ones rejuvenated. It seems that the allegedly Communist Chinese trust the transformatory power of the market more than the capitalist West does. The world is an ironic place.

What will happen to North Korea's nuclear program?

Common sense suggests that a change in policy would require a change in conditions. However, we have no reason to believe that any of the rationales for the nuclear program's existence has changed. North Korea uses its nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence according to the same logic as it was applied during the

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Cold War between East and West. The program is one of the few major achievements that Kim Jong Il could present to his people, and Kim Jong Un will not be stupid enough to shed it as long as he builds his legitimacy on the legacy of his father. Most importantly, the nuclear program keeps the neighbors worried and the world interested. This attention translates into diplomatic and economic gains that are desperately needed. Last but not least, this is about the only way North Korea can provide some counterbalance to the massive weight of China. The South Korean public seems to share my pessimism. In a poll conducted in November 2011, over 80 percent of respondents believed North Korea will not abandon its nuclear weapons. [국민 81%, 북한 핵포기 안할것, Hanguk Ilbo, 02.01.2012, link]

On the other hand, before Kim Jong Il died, a new round of talks was on the horizon. The experience of 1994 shows that despite the death of the supreme leader (July 1994), major progress can be achieved (Framework Agreement in October 1994). None of the official announcements since Dec. 19th 2011 includes any reference to nuclear weapons; neither directly nor implicitly through using code words (invincible might백승의 위력, treasured sword위력한 보검). According to Yoo Ho-yeol, this leaves room for the chance of improved ties with the United States. [The Guardian, 01.01.2012, link]

Last, but not least: the biggest danger stemming from the North Korean nuclear program might not be its military use. As the events in Japan in March 2011 have shown, even in rich and technologically highly developed economies, accidents cannot be excluded. We can only hope that maintenance work is done properly, and that the nuclear facilities do not become the target of any natural or man-made disaster.

What will Kim Jong Un's policy be?

Obviously, very little aside from "continuity" can be said at this point. It is also easy to see that he must find a way to resolve his country's economic shortages. From the study of socialist systems done by Janos Kornai [Kornai, Janos (1992). The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press] and others, we know that such shortage is chronic and systemic. In other words, it requires a change of the system rather than mere coping measures. True, North Korea was able to survive for a rather long time on a muddle-though strategy. But this does not change the fact that it is unsustainable. The Chinese example is the obvious solution, but will Kim Jong Un be willing, able, and allowed to follow it?

For the time being, we find a number of indicators that the economic well-being of his people is one of his top priorities. Remember that his introduction as successor on Dec. 19th was soon supplemented by news like this: "Leader Kim Jong Il, who had always been concerned for fish supply to Pyongyang citizens, took a measure for fish supply on the evening of December 16, a day before his demise. Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un, who has been overcome with the deepest grief at his demise, took all necessary measures to truck fresh fish to the capital city in time and supply the fish to the citizens even in the mourning period." [link]

This was followed by reports on the provision of hot water for mourners. On January 3rd, 2012, the third Pyongyang Department Store No. 1 goods exhibition was held [제 3차 평양제 1 백화점 상품전시회 개막, Rodong Sinmun, 04.01.2012, p. 3]. In the related article, Kim Jong Un is quoted with a number of remarks in the spirit of his father who had the previous exhibition held in July 2011. In other words, this emphasis on consumer goods is relatively recent, and it is upheld by Kim Jong Un.

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제3차 평양제1백화점 상품전시회 개막

To add one more hint at the future policy: At the mass rally held on Dec. 30th, two slogans were displayed prominently (and carried in the North Korean media). They read: "Improvement of People's Living Conditions", and "The Principle of Light Industry First".

Looking at the slogan to the left, have you noted the replacement of "Strong and Prosperous Great Country" (강성대국) with "Building an Economically Strong Country" (강경국가 건설)? Again, we must be careful not to jump to premature conclusions, but as a matter of fact, the central slogan of the past years has been modified in a way that emphasized the economy and drops military might.

The emphasis on light industry and agriculture, i.e. consumer goods, is also reflected in a new buzzword that emerged in close connection with the succession: "flames of Hamnam" (함남의 불길). It was first mentioned in Rodong Sinmun on Oct. 26th [link] and refers to an on-the-spot guidance by Kim Jong Il in October 2011. The 2012 New Year Joint Editorial says: "The flames of Hamnam for great innovation should flare up more fiercely in the sectors of light industry and agriculture, the leading sectors for the building of a thriving country". On Youtube, you can find a song emphasizing the role of the youth in building the economy [소개편집물 우리도 함남의 불길이 되리 함경남도 청년들, link]

This reference to economic policies, the improvement of the living standard, the production of consumer goods and the satisfaction of the citizen's material needs is no coincidence. Kim Jong Un and those behind him know their country well, and they are aware of what even we outsiders can note with a sharp eye. Among the many examples are two still images I generated from official KCNA video footage on the mourning. Even this carefully assembled reporting provides interesting insights into how North Korea's society is changing.

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Aside from the regular pictures of orderly lined-up masses, a solemn atmosphere and citizens overcome with grief, there was a TV interview with a lady in one of the shops where fresh fish was distributed. She could hardly hold back her tears when praising the two leaders for taking such good care of their people. What struck me, however, was the fact that her haircut was very similar to what we would expect from a South Korea woman of her age, and the fact that she had obviously undergone a form of "enhancement" that is extremely popular in SOUTH Korea: eyelid surgery. Is this so common now among middle-class women in Pyongyang that the state TV did not even notice?

This was not the only example. Among the masses standing at the roadside when Kim Jong Il's hearse passed by, one could find images of women with dyed hair and a haircut that in no way complied with "our style".

Care is advised not to overstate the importance of such examples, but they provide a stark contrast to the image produced by the North Korean state, and readily accepted by Western media, of uniformity and lack of individuality. As anyone who has been visiting North Korea in the past decades can confirm: this country is changing rapidly, self-confidence and individualism are growing, and a middle class has emerged. The old leadership initiated this process and then struggled to find a way to deal with the phenomenon. The new leadership has the task to continue this search for a way to move forward, to accommodate the demands of its citizens. All this must be done without being self-destructive. This is clearly not an easy task.

Conclusion: What should we expect for 2012?

The year 2012 will no doubt be an interesting one for North Korea and its observers. The first thing in chronological order would be the birthday of the new leader. In past years, it was reported that it is on January 8th. Filial piety would suggest restraint, but no mentioning at all could best be explained by the lack of time for a proper preparation. Or maybe we got the date wrong?

Next on the list is February 16th, the 70th birthday of the late Kim Jong Il. This would be a good occasion to unveil the first statue, and to assign him the title Eternal General (thus also

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having a chance to lay the Military First Policy to an honorable rest). As the benefactor of the Korean people, Kim Jong Un will hand out presents and extra food rations to his citizens and loyal followers.

We already learned from official publications that the 100th birthdays of the country's founder Kim Il Sung on April 15th will be celebrated despite the demise of his successor and eldest son.

This leads us to the question of the formalization of Kim Jong Un's rule. If he and his supporters manage to consolidate his power, at some point he needs to be given official and formal titles. The two on the list are General Secretary of the KWP, and Chairman of the National Defense Commission. On the other hand, Kim Jong Un must show proper piety to his father so as to earn the respect by Korea's tradition-oriented citizens. Let's not forget that Kim Jong Il only became Secretary General of the Party in 1997, after a three year mourning period for Kim Il Sung was over.

In any case, given the role as Kingmaker played by the Party so far, the 7th Party Congress of the WPK - whenever it takes place - would be an appropriate event to assign Kim Jong Un the title of Secretary General. If another mode is chosen, or if he is not assigned this title at all, we will have to ask ourselves why and what this tells us about Party support.

In 1998, the constitution was changed to make Kim Il Sung the Eternal President of the country, and to elevate the role of the National Defense Commission Chairman. Another amendment is not impossible, and a similar honor could be given to Kim Jong Il. The post held by Kim Jong Un could be upgraded.

On the policy side, it is fair to say at this point that a quick improvement of relations with Lee Myung-bak's South Korea is not on the top of the to-do list of Kim Jong Un. The accusations of disrespectful behavior have become so massive that we can only hope this to be the usual bellicose rhetoric, and not the prelude to another military incident. However, unification remains a state goal, and South Korea is the most natural cooperation partner for economic exchanges. The latter are crucial for achieving the promised improvement in the North Korean people's living standard. I would thus be rather optimistic about the prospects of an inter-Korean reconciliation. Whether this will happen under the current president is, however, questionable.

This means that for the time being, dependence on China as the only significant economic partner will remain high or even grow. Neither Seoul nor Pyongyang will be too happy about this, and alternatives will be actively sought. This opens new opportunities for Russia, the United States, and the EU. I would also keep a close eye on Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

However, a President Obama running against a conservative challenger will probably avoid anything that could be interpreted as appeasement and lack of toughness. The EU is more than ever preoccupied with itself. Another open window of opportunity might thus end up being closed unused, and North Korea could apply its old and proven strategies to keep us attentive. This includes the nuclear card in all of its variations.

Looking further into the future, missing the potential for improvement might turn out particularly unfortunate. If Kim Jong Un manages to survive the first years in power, he will gradually but steadily tighten his grip on the Party and the families. He will get rid of opponents, increase his group of loyalists, and thus weaken the institutions that at this moment seem to enjoy more power than they had in North Korea's history at any time since 1956. The quasi-collective leadership we are faced with right now will over the years turn into another one-person dictatorship as in the

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past. Unless the world seizes this opportunity for a breakthrough in relations, we might soon find ourselves in the same situation as it used to be in the past decades, with the same problems - except that, in the meanwhile, they might have grown in size.

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