

Korea's Changing Political Landscape

A 38 North Interview

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Interviewee: Dr. Yoo Ho-Yeol, Professor of North Korean Studies, Korea University

Interviewer: Mike Chinoy, Senior Fellow, US-China Institute, University of Southern California

TRANSCRIPT

Part I: Kim Jong Un's Rise to Power

Mike Chinoy: Professor Yoo, thanks for joining us. Let me start by asking you what is your take on the transition in North Korea now? Kim Jong Il died last December. Kim Jong Un has had several months trying to consolidate his position. What's your sense of how it's going?

Yoo Ho-Yeol: Well I think Kim Jong Il's death happened suddenly. Even though his health was not good and almost everyone was just cautious about what happened to his health and therefore Kim Jong Un's preparation for becoming a sole leader in North Korea is much earlier than we had expected, and he was officially named successor to his father Kim Jong Il in September, 2010 and therefore it was just one year and a half. But because of his father's sudden death, Kim Jong Un need more time to become a sole leader because he has to decide everything and he has to lead the country as his father and grandfather have done. And his aunt, Kim Kyong-Hui, I think she is playing a major role to protect and to support her nephew but it is not enough. What he meant to North Korea to become a normal state at this moment even though he completed his position in major field like party, government and military as the super leader but it's not enough for him. He has never worked with the party.

Chinoy: To what extent do you think Kim Jong Un is really in charge now? Some people talk about, use the description that he is reigning rather than ruling.

Yoo: Well it's possible. Sometimes in the past we heard about the Kim Jong Il's plan to learn from the kingdom like Thailand or the British Empire but I think North Korean's system, North Korean's totalitarian system, is a quite unique one. And without the supreme leader North Korea cannot be controlled, and therefore even though they feel that the leader with a kind of limited power or limited influence is not possible. Once he became the leader, he had to follow what his father and his grandfather had created.

Chinoy: One of the interesting descriptions that I have read of how leadership at the top works in North Korea is that Kim Il Sung was an all powerful ruler but that Kim Jong Il presided over the different institutions, the military, the party, the government and kind of mediated their different interest and so forth. To what extent do you think Kim Jong Un is now in a similar position that he can't just drive everything his own way but has to mediate different and often competing interest of different institutions in the North?

Yoo: Well I think your description were necessary and very accurate, because Kim Il Sung was a creator of the regime of North Korea, and therefore he could do everything he really wanted and he could realize and understand everything and therefore he could rely upon the collective leadership from the bottom to the top and he manipulated the party system quite well. But Kim Jong Il is a little bit different, because he is not the creator. He was just the hereditary or the successor, and therefore he could follow what his father had created and he also worked for the older generation and therefore he is quite relied upon his loyal supporters in the party and in the military and in the government also. And therefore Kim Jong Il was in the center and he directly gave order to the person he needed to get information or he has to give order and therefore, the system is quite different. Kim Jong Il's system is not a collective one, it's kind of totalitarian system and Kim Jong Il, in that sense Kim Jong Il is more powerful in that sense. And Kim Jong Un, he wanted to follow his grandfather because his figures and his style is very much similar to his grandfather, and he might feel much comfortable to what his grandfather has done to their people and to the system. However the system was created by his father. It is very comfortable for Kim Jong Il to control and therefore I think there is some kind of difference and some gaps between Kim Jong Il's idea and Kim Jong Un's attitude. And that's the fundamental problem for North Korea under Kim Jong Un's leadership.

Chinoy: Do you think Kim Jong Un really is in a position to sort of do what he wants, to ram through the policies that he wants?

Yoo: Well I think he could because the system could support and probably Kim Jong Il, even though he couldn't expect he could lead in such a short time but anyhow, he tried to make some preparation for his son to follow what he had built up in North Korea. And because of the lack of time for him to prepare, Kim Jong Un's leadership or Kim Jong Un's system couldn't be adjusted to what his father had made. And therefore I think Kim Jong Un had no chance to look into the operation within the party. Only the title dropped. What he had comfortably was military in some sense and therefore Kim Jong Il created a new position within the central committee for the military affairs in the party and vice chairman is the only title, official title when Kim Jon Il died. And therefore I think Kim Jong Un had no chance to learn how to lead, how to control, and how to order in the party or even in the government.

Chinoy: There is one school of thought among North Korea that believes that a collapse is definitely on the cards that the countries internal problems are so acute that the potential for instability is so high, that it is going to come crashing down. What's your own sense of the prospects or some kind of collapse?

Yoo: I think the system is quite strong because as Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il expected to have in North Korea, means that the politics of the military first. And the military is the most powerful and well organized system instituted in North Korea and therefore I think the North Korean system could be protected from outside aggression or invasion. Well it doesn't matter whether they have the nuclear weapons or not. But Kim Jong Un is now heavily relied on his aunt, Kim Kyong Hui. it seems to me that she is in charge of the party's most powerful bureau this organization and guidance bureau which was done when occupied when Kim Jong Il, when he died and therefore if once Kim Kyong Hui, Kim Jong Un's aunt is has enough to support her nephew Kim Jong Un in the party, in the military then I think the system could be resilient and could give some time for Kim Jong Un to learn more about how to become a sole leader in charge of the party, military and government. But Kim Kyong-Hui's house is not good enough according to some observers who had a chance to see her in distance or crossly and therefore if Kim couldn't work or couldn't help him then I think the system will be in real crisis or danger or instability. Up until then, the system could be protected or maintained.

Part II: Economic Prospects for the DPRK

Chinoy: In the late spring of this year, there were a couple very intriguing statements attributed to Kim Jong Un. In one he was quoted saying it was time for North Korean people to no longer have to tighten their belts and then there was a report to a visit he made Manyongdae day Fun Park where he talked about the need to remove outdated thinking from the heads of officials and get them to change their old ways of doing things. What do you make of that?

Yoo: Well I think Kim Jong Un has some experience learning in Switzerland and that he could probably watch Western TVs or movies and compared to his father he could say that there should be some changes to a better opening. But I think Kim Jong Il also was aware, fully aware of the situation but he also understood the system inside and therefore he couldn't directly, well he didn't try to change the system. But Kim Jong Un lack of experience, lack of understanding of the whole system he can just say what he had in mind and I think that he, well at the beginning might follow what the new leader had ordered. But, well, if they follow all his orders, then the system couldn't be maintained, as they had planned.

Chinoy: Do you see any realistic prospect of meaningful economic reforms in North Korea?

Yoo: Well I think there would be no fundamental changes or reforms because they already mention that they would maintain the status of nuclear power state. Well, I don't think they could give up their nuclear weapons until they are fully confident in their own system. Well Kim Jong Un is now just twenty eight, twenty nine years old. I think he might need at least five to ten years. Then without giving up the nuclear weapons, the sanctions against North Korea couldn't be lifted. Then I think even though North Korea or Kim Jong Un wants to change and to bring more investment from outside then I think no international community could support Kim Jong Un and North Korea.

Chinoy: Do you see these economic zones that the North Koreans have set up or talking about setting up with the Chinese, is having any meaningful impact on the country's economic direction or policies?

Yoo: Well actually last year, last April I visited Dandong, the western side to see the Chinese project and the possibility of whether North Korea will accept what Chinese business or local government had demanded to North Korea. And my observation is very negative. But on the other hand, the eastern side Rason special economic zone, well it's a Chinese national interest. So I think China could spend or invest whatever North Korea could demand or whatever the regulation would be to maintain the system to the corporation, the economic corporation. And therefore Chinese would make what we use, those ports. It is an access to the eastern sea. It is not a commercial, 100 percent, it is kind of political and military goals. Therefore it could be maintained and North Koreans, even though they think exchanges and corporations with China would help with their economic progress or development. But I think Pyongyang or the bureaucrat inside North Korea didn't have any long term project, long plan to use that experience to develop their own economy. So I think it is very limited, even though North Korea could get the currency to buy or to use to build Pyongyang or whatever luxurious items they need. I think it is very limited. And therefore the western side, Chinese has less national interest or strategic interest. And North Korea didn't provide any incentive motivation for Chinese businessmen; working government to invest and therefore I think it is very difficult to see a progress in that area. That's North Korean's fundamental dilemma excluding the nuclear issues in North Korea.

Chinoy: What's your take on China's general approach to North Korea? It seems clear that the Chinese don't like the cult of personality. They like to see the North Koreans adopt Chinese style, economic reforms and yet at the same time, the evidence suggests that the Chinese are prepared to support North Korea as long as the North doesn't basically start a war. That Beijing will stick by them and help them in whatever ways they can.

Yoo: Well I think the Chinese main interest or the major concern is all the peace in that region. And therefore they need the North Korean regime in Pyongyang could maintain the influence and the government should be operated as normal. And therefore they will provide any materials that Pyongyang needs. And I think that is the priority the number one for Chinese calculation in dealing with North Korea. And the second one is that they need a communist country neighboring to China, well China has fourteen different countries at least bordered with China. And this area is very critical with them and therefore they need North Korea to remain a communist country. But the best option for them is to see North Korea to be following a Chinese model and successful communist country or North Korea socialist whatever but they realize it is not possible under these circumstances. And therefore they just satisfy with the current situation they provide little economic incentive and they provide political and military protection from outside influence against North Korea.

Chinoy: One of the interesting things now is that basically all of North Korea's few friends around the world are in the middle of some kind of change. It's not just Vietnam or even China but you've got Cuba and you've got Burma. Could that possibly have some impact on the way the North Koreans operate internally?

Yoo: I think it gave some impact. Well last month I was invited to give lectures to Geneva Center for Security Policy. There were two North Korean military officers. They were spending three months there and I gave a lecture about North Korean political transition along with a friend expert on that issue, altogether. She mentioned about the collapse; and those two young military officers, loyal to the system, they had to listen and all the participant members, fifty five people or students coming from different countries, they were diplomat or public officers or even military senior officers. And they could discuss all the things just like we are discussing things among ourselves. And they asked to give them the chance to response but it is very limited and they realize that the situation has been changed surrounding North Korea and Korean peninsula. And the next day I talked about unification issues and they didn't make any response to my lectures but they just listened. And I think they are loyal people. They enjoy all the privileges and they would become generals without any problem because they are selected among one million people to spend some days outside, they are confident or trusted officers but they could listen and maybe they could examine. Maybe they would be in some cases to be reeducated when they are going back to North Korea but I think it is very important to realize that if South Koreans are only persons who are talking about the change and reform in North Korea then they might worry or they have doubt about the intention of such kind of advice. But all the countries except North Korea are saying almost or exactly the same, well there are some differences and different nuance. But the main idea or the main point is the same; to reform and to open. There is no other option for them to survive or to make progress.

Part III: South Korean Presidential Elections: The North Korea Factor

Chinoy: There is an election coming up later this year in South Korea. To what extent do you think is there a danger that the North Koreans might move from just rhetorical threats to actually taking some kind of provocative action in the hope of influencing the outcome of the election, for example, trying to scare the South Korean people into voting for a progressive candidate for a president on the grounds that a conservative candidate will only produce more tension and potential conflict with the North?

Yoo: Well I think it is possible but based upon North Korean's previous actions or records, whenever they observe or expect some leadership changes or government changes in South Korea or in the United States. They are trying to test and they are trying to get a better position in dealing with the future government or future ruling groups. And therefore this year they are trying to, at the beginning of this year they are trying to utilize both elections in South Korea but opposing contrast to their expectation this election was done by the winning of the conservative parties. It is kind of a reality. North Korea's old

tactics and old limited access to South Korea's politics, they couldn't achieve what they really wanted. And therefore, for the (position) election, the board the important one, they already mentioned they would talk all the details all the South Korean political leaders had done in North Korea. And they mention, actually, Park Geun Hye visited and met Kim Jong Il almost ten years ago and the leading politicians or candidate of ruling and opposition party. They are trying to say that once they reveal all the talks or behavior in North Korea, then a shocking situation could happen in South Korea. They are probably confident in their intention or argument but it's not possible anymore. But that's the situation even though they wanted or expected to make a major influence by provocative actions or provocative words. But I think South Korea is already well prepared or well adjusted to such old tactics from the North.

Chinoy: Can you spell out a little bit? What's your understanding of the approach to North Korea of the different political camps here in South Korea and what are the potential implications regardless of who wins the election in terms of future South Korean dealings with the North?

Yoo: Well actually the interesting things among South Korean politicians or parties was that even though the North Korean issues or unification issues was one of the hot items, hot policy agendas in South Korea but they realize that it is not necessarily supportive for getting votes among the population. So they are always trying to downsize the inter-Korean relations or North Korean relations. They are always emphasizing the economic issue or education issues, welfare issues. But because of such a new diverse after the general election, all the candidates of the presidential election, they de-vitalize the ideas or policy approaches that deal with North Korea. So I think it's very positive for getting a better chance to improve relations or to maintain peace and stability even prior to the election. Well one of the difficult or one of the problems we had with the Lee Myung Bak's government is that they didn't prepare quite well prior to the election because it's quite natural or quite rational for any candidate to not pay much attention to any delicate issues which couldn't get enough votes. But now all the camps and all the parties are trying to carefully watch the population's opinions or reaction from the outside and I think it is much better to have more time to prepare.

Chinoy: What is your assessment of Pak Geun Hye's view of North Korea? I've heard some people speculate. Could she be the South Korea Nixon as a conservative who could make a breakthrough with the North in a way a progressive couldn't?

Yoo: Well actually it's too early but actually we have almost nothing to get access to what Pak Geun Hye had in mind except for her articles in foreign affairs to build confidence. Well, that's very simple and kind of common sense. But she didn't. Well her camp didn't manipulate or elaborate how to achieve the confidence building with North Korea. So I think it is too early for her to become a very progressive, conservative leader. Well I think she is a very smart politician to understand the political dynamics not just in South Korea but among the neighboring states. So we could expect that she might, if she spends more time and if she concentrates on those issues then I think the situation could be much better. Well it is the exact same to other politicians in the opposition party too.

Part IV: The Nuclear Issue

Chinoy: I'd like to ask what you make of the Obama administration strategy towards North Korea. For a long time the strategy was really one of malign neglect as essentially not doing anything. Then they tried to cut a deal, the February 29th agreement, which fell apart. So what's your assessment of how the Obama administration has done in its dealings with the North?

Yoo: Well I can think of a couple things President Obama has to pay attention accept the North Korean world or the Korean peninsula because he has to deal with the issues in the Middle East or upper eastern.

And also he has to resolve the issues between China and the US. It is a very critical and important issue and he always says the Korean or the North Korean issues will be followed by the big deal between China and the US but it is not a simple or easy task for him. And also the Obama administration had no intention to have major figures in dealing with North Korean issues and nuclear issues compared to the previous regime like Gallucci or the Christopher Hill. They are an excellent person who had great experience and also they could deal with. But the Obama administration, well because of the environment, because of the diversity of the political interests he couldn't put someone in charge of the whole important issues in dealing with the North Korea. I understood the situation but compared to the previous regime in the US, the Obama administration, just like the Lee Myung Bak government has done on the Korean pension. But the relationship between the two governments, well actually the Lee Myung Bak government is conservative and the Obama is the Democratic Party but the matching is almost perfect. So it is very curious.

Chinoy: We've got a situation now where diplomacy is effectively at a standstill and what this seems to mean is that there is nothing to constrain North Korea from continuing to develop nuclear weapons and moving into a direction that the US and South Korea don't want to see. Do you have any thoughts about what this means, where is this going and what are the potential implications?

Yoo: Well I think we have a kind of multiple accesses or multiple channels to be operated and in dealing with North Korean issues, such as we need to manage the nuclear at the top. And we have to prevent any military publication in regional areas with the corporation with China and Russia together. And also we have to utilize, we have a very good asset in South Korea to twenty-four thousand North Korean refugees here in South Korea. And there are two thousand college students now studying in major campuses. And they have their relatives and friends in North Korea. And they are contributing to get access to the international community by sending or providing materials like cash or information or whatever. And therefore according to some data, the recent refugees from North Korea to South Korea are relatives or family members, they are paying to get them out of North Korea and those town people realize some of their family members have gone to South Korea and they live quite well. And therefore I think their ideas or their loyalty or the intimacy hasn't been changed. I think it is very important. They saw that without running the philosophy or the self-reliance ideology, they felt that Kim is uncreative and he is a great leader and Kim Jong Il could maintain or could protect them from outside aggression. However, the situation and those living in South Korea from North Korea, well it took time for them to adjust to South Korean's competitive society but we had national assembly men and the doctors and professors and some entertainers and they are just saying they are refugees, North Korean defectors but they feel quite comfortable. And it's kind of a message to family members or friends in North Korea. They had to have a different idea or different loyalty. And I think that it will take time. I think it is slowly, but I think it will follow what East Germans had in mind, well prior to the massive demonstration.

Chinoy: But in the meantime the North Koreans are just moving ahead, able to develop their nuclear capability without any constraints at all.

Yoo: Well I think we need to manage, slow down. I think dialogue is important in that sense. Well of course I met North Korean's diplomat in Stockholm right after the North Korean announcement to shoot their piece of scientific, their long range satellite. And I think they feel they need to get some changes in dealing with the international community. But the system is up. It is still legit. There is no room for them to make fundamental changes. But they realize that all the people, not just South Koreans or the Americans but the European peoples or the Chinese are telling them outside North Korea that it is good for North Korea and North Koreans to look beyond the current situation to stick to possessing nuclear weapons to protect and to maintain the system. Well, look at the Chinese models and Vietnam models and even the former Eastern Germans.

Chinoy: Ok, we'll leave it there. Professor Yoo, thanks very much for joining us.

Dr. Yoo Ho-Yeol is former Dean of the Graduate School of Public Administration of Korea University and a professor and director of North Korean Studies at Korea University. At Korea University he is responsible for teaching undergraduate and graduate students on the inter-Korean relations and North Korean politics and foreign policy since 1999. Prior to taking up his teaching position at Korea University, he served as a research fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU). At KINU, he worked extensively on the relationship between North and South Korea as director of the Unification Policy Division (1998), the Office of Planning and Budget (1995-97), and the Information Management Division (1991-94).

Dr. Yoo will be President of the Korean Political Science Association in 2013, and has led various academic associations in the past, including the Korean Association of North Korean Studies (2008). He also is co-chairman for the nongovernmental organization Citizens' Unity for Right Society. He serves as a policy adviser for the Ministry of National Unification and the Ministry of Defense, as well as for the Unification Committee of the National Assembly. He is acting chairman of the advisory group in charge of planning & guidance for the National Council for Democratic & Peaceful Unification, and president of the Korea Policy Research Center, a private think-tank supported by the ROK Ministry of Unification. He was a visiting scholar at the Mershon Center of the Ohio State University in 2003-04.

Dr. Yoo received a B.A. and M.A. in political science and international relations from Korea University, and a doctorate in comparative politics from the Ohio State University. He is the author of *Socialism in North Korea: Construction and Frustration* (Seoul: Itreebook, 2004) and co-authored *North Korean Policy toward Overseas Koreans* (Seoul: Jipmundang, 2003) and *North Korean Political System* (Seoul: Eulyoo, 2000).

Mike Chinoy is a Senior Fellow at the U.S.-China Institute at University of Southern California. He was CNN's Senior Asia Correspondent and served as a foreign correspondent for more than thirty years. After joining CNN at its London bureau in 1983, Chinoy served as Beijing Bureau Chief from 1987 to 1995. During that time he covered the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square, earning the CableACE, duPont and Peabody awards. He was also Hong Kong Bureau Chief for five years. His other awards include the Silver Medal from the New York Film Festival and Asian Television Awards for his reporting in Indonesia and Taiwan. Chinoy's published two books, [*China Live: People Power and the Television Revolution*](#) (1999) and [*Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*](#) (2008). He taught at the USC Annenberg School of Communication and ran the School's Hong Kong summer program 2007-2009. From 2006-2009 he was Edgerton Senior Fellow at the Pacific Council for International Policy.