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Internal Developments in North Korea: Succession

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On July 15, 2010, 38 North held a workshop in Seoul, sponsored by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, which gathered together experts from the U.S., South Korea, Europe, China and Japan, to discuss the latest developments regarding North Korea, both internal and external, with the goal of identifying future research priorities.

38 North is pleased to provide excerpts of this dialogue to our readers. This is the second of two installments on domestic developments in North Korea, which discusses the issue of succession.

You can find the first half of this discussion, which focused on the North Korean economy, at www.38north.org.

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U.S. EXPERT: I wonder if at this point we might want to draw together some of the threads that we've been following here, and combine some of these political and economic factors. I want to add some of the political considerations, especially with

regards to the role and profile of the National Defense Council (NDC).

If we go back to the 2002 reforms and what we saw in *Kyongje Yongu* (the North's economic journal), it was not simply a question of reforming the economy in economic terms. It was about the dominance of the military in economic matters and allowing the civil sector to have much more influence and access to resources; that was part of the debate in that period. This raises a question because of the new profile of the NDC. Here we have the accumulation and the concentration of defense and security authority in a way we hadn't seen before. In bureaucratic terms, we know that it's not unimportant where people are in the bureaucratic boxes. They meet, they consult, and they have access to resources. Now you have concentration of them in North Korea, but don't have anything similar in the civil economy. In fact, the cabinet seems to have diminished in its influence.

So the question, it seems to me, that is posed here is: Does the dominance, if that's what it is, of the NDC bode ill for

any new economic type reform measures? Out of nowhere, the Politburo appoints the premier of the cabinet. We haven't seen the Politburo mentioned as a decision making body in decades. Then a few weeks later we find out they are going to have a party conference, which is a huge thing. We haven't seen anything like that in decades, either. So what is really happening? Is the party really being re-energized? If it is, why? And what does it mean for the rebalancing potential of the centers of authority and influence in North Korea? Or is it all just eyewash?

MODERATOR: Frankly, I wouldn't say this is coming out of nowhere. This resurrection of party values is not a recent phenomenon. It has been going on for a couple of years. What we see this year is more or less the visible part of that. Let's say the party—I don't know if it's true or not—is trying to regain its position that might have been lost (I'm not even sure about that). I never bought into the idea of the military taking over for a number of reasons. To begin with, in regards to the party and the military as well, I would take North Korea's statements at face value. It's impossible to pit those two against each other; they are part of the same system. Every high ranking military guy also has a high post in the party. I never got this two camp theory.

U.S. EXPERT: That may not be the issue in terms of NDC versus the party. It seems to me what we've seen in the last 15 years is the atrophying of the party below the central level. Down at the local level, people no longer seem interested in joining the party. It's no longer the route to social benefit in the way that it used to be.

MODERATOR: Yes, but is that because of the military or is it because the market opened other new opportunities?

U.S. EXPERT: I don't know. The party once existed as a super structure, but didn't seem to have anything beneath it. Now is it being revised? I guess that's my question.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: There has been mention of the revival of the party and I think that it is more real than imagined. Kim Jong Il has been trying to sideline or sidestep the party apparatus, but now, as you mentioned, we've seen the Politburo's reappearance and a party conference will be in September. That might lead to the opening of the party congress, which hasn't convened since 1980. Why is it coming back? I think the answer is short and simple: succession. North Korea is run by the Korean Worker's Party and for political succession to be real it needs to be recognized by the Korean Worker's Party. I think that's the reason.

MODERATOR: How would that proceed? Do you think they will announce Kim Jong Eun, or what will they do?

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: That may happen in many ways. They may do it in a secret way and some-time later let it be known to the outside world. That was the case in the early 1970s when Kim Jong Il was handpicked as the successor. North Koreans will pick their way by the primary organization endorsing

whomever as the successor to Kim Jong Il will be through the mechanism of the Korea Worker's Party and I think that's the reason we hear more about the central committee, politburo, etc.

Going back to the idea that party officials appear to be losing popularity at the lower ranking level, I think the answer has to do with economic welfare. In the past, party officials had prestige and stability and with that came financial payback, but nowadays party officials and government officials are not as popular because they are not getting paid enough. On competition among the NDC, the party, and the military, I think the NDC's primary objective is to ensure the political power succession. There are different opinions among South Korean scholars. Some are of the opinion that the NDC is prime mover behind this. Others say the party is the prime mover. And others think that the military is. I think they are working in tandem. They are all together in this job—the party, the military, and the NDC. But the NDC will function as the umbrella or the front organization. But here is a downside to the NDC. It has no big concrete substructure, so the NDC will have to eventually have to rely on the party apparatus.

If I may say one more thing about the power succession issue. Whether it will be successful, I don't know. Of course, the elites will engage in political calculations and several factors will come into play. If they get involved in a power struggle, it will be an all or nothing game. It will be highly risky—high-yielding, but highly risky. You can lose everything, and the state may collapse as a result. So they may think an ordered power transfer is preferable. The two basic factors in North Korean calculations will be whether the gain from a power struggle or a power transfer will outweigh the potential costs coming from the failure of a power struggle. If A is bigger than B, then I think succession will be more successful than we can generally imagine in the West and outside. Then there is also the factor of the uniqueness of the North Korean system, which has known no leader other than the Kim Il Sung family and where power has been passed from father to son.

MODERATOR: There was a similar discussion around 1994 about whether Kim Jong Il would really be able to get all the power because he was not like his father and so on and so on, but in the end, he turned out to be a relatively stable leader.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: An inefficient, but highly stable leader.

MODERATOR: Nevertheless, he has survived and was not openly challenged for all the reasons that everybody in the system knows: You're either with him or it doesn't work at all.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: My point is that we should distinguish between wishful thinking and real predictions. Normatively speaking, we know what we want. We have our preferences, but that shouldn't color our predictions.

MODERATOR: If I understand you correctly, for the North Korean system, the most important thing is stability. The leadership elites know it, and they would be ready to sacrifice their own power and ambitions for it.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: I'm saying that factor could weigh in heavily in the North Korean elites' minds. That's all I'm saying.

MODERATOR: I strongly agree. What is needed in North Korea for stability is a strong leader to keep all the people in line. I mean, it is Korea right? There are always factions and groups who think they can make it better, and you have to have a leader who can keep all this under control somehow.

But I think the big question is: Will the grandson of Kim Il Sung be such a strong leader? I think you raised that before—whether or not the elite believe that supporting Kim Jong Eun would be a good idea. Maybe some will not, and then you will have power struggle. That's the problem: Do they trust him? Do they trust him to be powerful enough? I'm not so sure about this.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: I'm not sure this is the right question—if they can trust him. The right question would be would they respect him?

MODERATOR: That's what I mean.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: I couldn't agree more with what you just said because I don't think anyone has an interest in challenging the leading role of the Worker's Party. Too many have a stake in the game, and they know if they challenge the Worker's Party, they will all be the losers. Of course, the Party in the past years has lost influence not so much in the major cities but especially in the countryside.

It is a big mistake to judge the system by talking about positions. Positions are nothing. Position is not as important as loyalty—loyalty to the people and loyalty to the family. This is important, judging people by their loyalty.

The second thing is the NDC depends on the party because every member is appointed by the party and can be removed any time. This is one indication that the party is more or less formally in control. But they seem to want to regain real control. For instance, they have sent more and more party officials to companies. When somebody from the military or the administration shows up to give advice on the spot, the director of the company has to report to the party secretary in the company. He then has to report to the central party and then everyone knows who visited the company and what he was advising on and what he proposed, and they have to okay it. So this means the party is everywhere and involved somehow and is much better informed than it used to be.

So what is going to happen in September? Nobody knows if this is a secret election or vote or a public vote because they simply have not yet decided, so we don't have any answer to this. But they have to strengthen the role of the party—related to the transformation of power. If Kim Jong Eun is appointed or Jang Song Taek will have another role in the party I don't know.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: This direction of the party is a recent development in North Korean domestic politics. Of course, the NDC has been the higher organization in North Korea. But recently, they have mentioned the party, in particular, the orders from the central committee. I think it's very closely re-

lated to succession because the party is the only organization that can support or defend the young leader—if they pick him as the next leader. The problem is Kim Jong Il's way of managing the country—he didn't want collective leadership like what his father practiced. Kim Il Sung based his order on reports from different views all given to him directly; Kim Jong Il does not. But perhaps Kim Jong Il now sees Kim Jong Eun as so young and inexperienced that the party should support him.

Last year, the constitution was revised and the NDC was legally designated as the top political institution in North Korea. So, even if Kim Jong Eun takes some important position in the party, Kim Jong Il will still maintain his influence as the chairman of the NDC and control everything. I think that is the step-by-step approach to transfer power to his son.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: In terms of the political succession, several recent events seem to be closely related to the transfer of power from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Eun. The fact that North Korea is holding the Supreme People's Assembly and the party delegates are gathering together after 44 years has very important implications for recent political decisions. They held these kinds of assemblies only twice before—in 1958 and 1966—but now they are having one again.

For the succession, there seem to be two possible routes. One is a father-to-son succession scenario, where Kim Jong Eun would succeed right away after Kim Jong Il either steps down or passes away. The other is that Jang Song Taek will serve as a bridge between Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Eun. I think the latter is the more realistic option and that he will serve as a bridge for 3-5 years, while Kim Jong Eun is trained in the party or military to gain experience before taking power. That is the most realistic and stable option for North Korea right now. Direct succession from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Eun seems very dangerous to me because of the internal and external pressures on North Korea: economic difficulties inside and tense inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korean relations outside. Under these conditions, direct succession is not a good choice. There has to be an alternative.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: The question of whether a decision will be made at the party congress in 2012 or at the upcoming congress in September depends very much on the health of Kim Jong Il. Do they have the time to postpone this decision, which is obviously necessary, to the year 2012? Everything that happens now in North Korea is a question of timing and related to the health of Kim Jong Il. That's my personal impression. If they don't have time, they will make the decisions in September. If they do, they will wait until 2012.

What kind of decision can we expect? What I would totally exclude is collective leadership. Leadership in North Korea is one person. If it's Jang Song Taek or Kim Jong Eun, this is not a question. Propaganda on Kim Jong Eun is already ongoing. He is being systematically introduced into the society. I think Kim Jong Eun will succeed his father directly, supported, of course, by Jang Song Taek and the people surrounding him—it's not only Jang, it's General O (NDC Vice Chairman O Kuk Ryol). The role of the NDC at the moment is more or less to secure the succession of Kim Jong Eun.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: The purpose of this September's meeting is to prepare for the deteriorating condition of Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Eun was already appointed as successor to Kim Jong Il last January, and I expect that the September meeting will make it official. While Kim Jong Il is still alive, North Korea will have dual leadership with Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Eun and this will be institutionalized through the party representatives' meeting. It is true that under Kim Jong Il's rule, the NDC has been placed at the center of the ruling authority through constitutional changes that deprived the party of its authority to make decisions about national matters. The problem with this policy was the growth of the NDC and the over expansion of its influence. The military-first policy undermined the ruling functions of the party—a party that will center around Kim Jong Eun. Because the over expansion of the NDC will inevitably undermine the independent policy making role of the party, Kim Jong Eun will take control of the party and eventually diminish the role of the NDC. The failures of the 150-day and 100-day revolutionary campaigns (old-style ideologically-based economic campaigns) evidently showed that the military-first policy cannot revive the dying economy. Consequently, North Korea is returning to the system of party rule instead of a focus on the NDC. The focus on the party members will inevitably lead to state capitalism which will then turn into *apparatchik* capitalism.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: Just a brief remark. We should probably differentiate between what is actually going to happen and what should be happening. It's not necessarily the same thing. One thing is understanding the system and drawing the most probable result, and then we always have the human factor, which may change everything. That is why I am very reluctant to engage in predicting the future. What we can say is that if something happens then "this" might be the possible result. I think this is what we can say with relatively safety.

JAPANESE EXPERT: I'd like to point out only two things related to succession. One aspect is looking at the situation from Kim Jong Il's perspective, in which the most important thing is how to prevent becoming like his father by and having his powers taken away by the successor before he passes from the scene. Another is that Jang Song Taek can possibly get power very smoothly or might try to make the successor a figurehead without power. So they are very skeptical of Jang Song Taek's role.

U.S. EXPERT: I know there is a real temptation to imagine that the party conference in September will almost be exclusively focused on this succession issue, but let's remember that the party conference in 1966 had some very important policy implications, as did the party conference in 1958. So that even if it is focused on succession, we could once again see a party conference come up with policy guidelines that will really alter the course of North Korean external policies. The 1966 party conference was the opening to this very dangerous period from 1966-70 when there were fire fights along the DMZ, the seizure of the *Pueblo*, the raid on the Blue House and all sorts of things. Combined with the NDC's rise, you've got the possibility for some very ugly consequences. We can't predict, but we should be watching carefully to see what else comes out of the meeting.

My second point is it is very important to consider personal style: Kim Jong Il's versus Kim Il Sung's. Kim Il Sung, from my understanding, liked to hear what was the consensus opinion of the Politburo because that

was his basis for making his decisions and keeping a balance among his subordinates. Kim Jong Il does not like to hear that. He wants to know what one person is thinking. Somebody would say to him, “Well, we all decided such and such.” And his answer would be, “I don’t care what you all decided. What do you think?” That makes a big difference to the party because the party doesn’t operate that way. Now if we’re going back to that, we’re going, in effect, counter to what Kim Jong Il’s long term personal style is and it’s going to have some implications for decision making at some point. Whether that is going to feed directly into Kim Jong Eun’s rise to power or not remains to be seen. But these are not minor tweakings of decision-making styles; it seems to me they have some pretty big implications.

The third point is on whether or not the party still rules because it makes personnel appointments. My understanding is personnel appointments are made by one department: the Organization and Guidance Department of the party. In effect, the party has been reduced to a small circle around Kim Jong Il—a “gang” of a thousand or so. In my mind, even though nominally that’s the party, that’s very different from a party structure. North Korea used to have a mass party, thousands and hundreds of thousands of people were members. That’s what has changed so much. So that even though you could nominally say the party still makes the appointments, it’s not the party writ large; it’s a very compact number of people working directly for Kim Jong Il. So in effect Kim Jong Il makes the appointments.

My final point, and I think we’ve been discussing it, is about dual rule. Can you really have dual rule in North Korea? Kim Jong Il’s experience was that he got power away from his father. By the time his father died, Kim Jong Il was already in control. That’s why there was no question of anyone challenging his authority. He had already appointed all the people he needed. Kim Jong Eun has not done that yet. He just hasn’t had time. He has been working at it, but the question is does he have enough people in place so that he can begin drawing power away from his father? So those are the things we want to be looking at as we go through this next period of 12-18 months.

MODERATOR: You know, I would actually support the idea that the original plan was very different and as Kim Jong Il became sick, the original plan simply vanished because they found they had to really speed up the process. I even believe that Kim Il Sung himself must have had some ideas about succession because he was smart enough to know that his son would not live forever. I guess they even talked about how to handle that but they did not consider that Kim Jong Il would get seriously sick so early. So, we are probably already in a period of chaos.

I just wanted to add to your argument that Kim Jong Eun is then supposed to lighten the burden of Kim Jong Il, if I understood you correctly. It’s interesting we get similar stories about how Kim Jong Suk (Kim Jong Il’s mother) sacrificed herself to lighten the burden of Kim Il Sung. Also recently I read a story about Kim Il Sung. On the day before his death, he instructed officials to lighten the burden for Kim Jong Il because he was working so hard. There is a similar narrative throughout about “lightening each other’s burdens” that would support your argument very strongly.

SOUTH KOREAN EXPERT: I just want to add one point to the prior discussion of North Korean political succession. I think the power succession refers to whole leadership replacement from the elders to the younger generation. Ten of the thirteen current members of NDC are over 70 years old so I think the power succession involves a comprehensive shuffle of the current power structure of the DPRK. It will be a long process and more complicated.

— END PART II —