

THE DPRK'S FACTORS OF STABILITY AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

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1. Introduction

During the last two decades Pyongyang, in spite of incessant pronouncements of the “collapse theory” advocates and other numerous predictions of North Korea’s imminent demise, has managed to cope with loss of its major political and military allies, to deflect military threats from its main adversaries, and, finally, escaped an economic downfall of the country.

Though situation in the DPRK is still complicated, it remains generally stable. The ruling elite, brought up to power by the country’s previous leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, have succeeded in ensuring transition of power to Kim Jong-un, maintaining political and social stability and sustainable control over the country.

In this paper the author will present his personal opinion on major factors which ensured these remarkable results. The situation leaves us with meager chances to change North Korea’s international behavior unless the world community engages the country in honest to alleviate the regime’s fears – real or imaginary ones.

2. Elite’s Unity: Damaged, but Sustained

Jang Song-thaek’s case revealed for the outside world many hidden sides of domestic political and economic situation in the country. We have learned that some high-ranking officials can disobey the Leader’s orders and were trying to stage a coup.¹ They were capable of establishing control over many branches of government and sectors of the country’s economy which happened to be on the verge of collapse.²

The list of crimes, allegedly committed by Mr.Jang, is rather impressive. A Canadian blogger, commenting on the event with good sense of humor, noted that according to the list, Mr. Jang seems is well qualified to become the next Toronto mayor. The most serious offence committed by Mr. Jang, to my opinion, is an

attempt to execute a role of a regent in true meaning of the word. He seemingly has tried if not to establish an alternative center of power, but to play a role the only interpreter of the Leader's directives. The move was considered as a "bid to overthrow the leadership of our party and state."³ It is hard to imagine a more grave crime in North Korea.

The second one was certainly money-making in an attempt to collect his funds by channeling money from various state revenues and projects. Considering current uneasy financial situation the DPRK is facing with because of UNSC-imposed sanctions and the U.S. unilateral actions, such behavior by Mr. Jang was considered intolerable.

Nonetheless, neither serious flaws in the functioning of the Party and state apparatus, nor dire economic problems and unfavorable international environment have proved to be serious enough to undermine the North Korean leadership's grip on power, political and social stability and sustainable control over the country.

Jang Song-thaek's case demonstrated absence of any formidable opposition force capable of hindering power transfer process after Kim Jong-il's death. The line-ups of the North Korean leadership published on several occasions after Mr. Jang's execution proved that none of the Politburo and WPK CC Secretariat members happened to be members of his group or supported him. The events have proved that the new leader is fully in control of the country.

Potential sources of discord, which some foreign observers used to pin so many hopes on during the last two decades, have clearly failed to bring about destabilization of the regime. Infighting between "conservatives" (ideologists) and "technocrats" (pragmatics) which many analysts expected to exacerbate initially after Kim Jong-il left the political arena, if it is really going on, is being waged not for so-called liberal democracy values.

The North Korean conservatives have demonstrated staggering ability, whenever it was necessary, to become successful pragmatics (with virtually no major trump cards in the hands they made major world powers to negotiate with DPRK for two decades actually on equal footing). And reformers were cautious enough to realize that drastic twists in policy can trigger processes that eventually could lead to unleashing process beyond their control.

The so-called "contradictions" between the DPRK Foreign Ministry officials and the North Korean military, which reportedly surfaced from time to time at the talks with the U.S.A. with the passage of time look ever more like a product of wishful thinking. While recognizing the fact of the military's strong positions in the DPRK's leadership and their more rigid stance in dealing with the U.S.A., it would be misleading to overestimate their influence or imagine that their core interests differ from those of the regime. Both civil and military branches of the ruling elite are interested first of all in ensuring the North Korean state's survival.

Sure, a group of top military commanders occupies a special place in the country's leadership. However recent frequent reshuffles of the top military commanders have proved that Kim Jong-un, like his father is not a "hostage" of the military and can rule without their consent. On the other side, there is no doubt that the new leader is doing a lot to win the top brass on his side by promoting them to higher military ranks/using the same tactic employed by his father.

However, in assessing the real extent of power and influence enjoyed by North Korea's top nomenclature, including military one, it is important to bear in mind that each and every top official personally remains completely voiceless and unprotected from the leader's self-will. The DPRK's history provides with many examples how the most brilliant careers were ruined, and members of the Party and state leadership

suddenly disappeared from the political arena and later have been spotted, at best, in the position of a director of county's automobile company (the WPK CC Political Committee Alternative member, Chief of the KPA General Staff Choe Kwan in the late of the 1960s) or some industrial plants (the WPK CC Politburo Alternative member, vice-Premier Kim Dal-hyon in the early of the 1990s).

Almost all members of the DPRK's present leadership at various stages of their careers were punished, purged, sent to get a "revolutionary re-education" (many of them more than once) and even removed from political life- in the case of Kim Yong-ju – Kim Il-sung's younger brother - almost for two decades. On the other side, Kim Il-sung as the founder of the clan and its patriarch, usually did not resort to "extreme" measures against his clan's members and sooner or later return guilty ones to his entourage. Kim Jong-il, in general, follows this line, too.

Such methods enhanced, to some extent, the effectiveness of state machinery, provided it with a new vigor and, very often, were used for shifting off the responsibility for wrong decisions of the "Great Leader" to the low-level officials.

At the same time, such arbitrary practices which entailed "the loss of face" and public humiliation of rather respectable people, who themselves, as a rule, have been heads of their own clans, could hardly contribute to broadening the ranks of genuine supporters of Kim's clan. Most of those who had been purged have already died, but their children know well their fathers' life stories and may be are waiting for the time to take revenge.

Some experts claim that Mr.Chang case demonstrated that from now on none of the members of the top leadership can feel secure. The new situation could lead to more serious infighting among the top elite. But I inclined to see it as a rather isolated and at the same very convincing warning aimed at disciplining the elite. Mr. Chang's power and influence was stemming from the mere fact that he was a husband of the ruling family's member, but never a full-fledged family member. His career was brisk and skyrocketing as long as he was serving the family well. But when he tried to pull over the blanket too much, the punishment was devastating.

The purge of Jang Song-thaek demonstrated that the North Korean leadership is determined to root out at an early stage emergence of any faction inside the WPK and government, to say nothing of any civic group or organization capable of challenging the existing system

Another major factor behind the current seemingly solid unity of the North Korean elite is that both hard-liners and pragmatists have learned a lot from the fate of some top leaders in the former East Europe's socialist countries as well as in some third world countries. Trials on former Communist parties' Politburo members and ex-Presidents in Europe, Middle East and Asia happened to be a very convincing argument employed by those in North Korea who warn against rocking the boat and call "to share life and death with the Leader". The DPRK's reaction to the events in Libya is the latest confirmation of the position.⁴

This approach is supported by numerous strata of middle and even low-level WPK and government officials across the country, including army and security forces officers, managers of industrial enterprises and agricultural cooperative farms who, along with their family members, would lose literally everything in case of the regime's collapse or soft-landing.

At the same time awareness of being «in the same boat» does not exclude existence of different approaches and even disputes between conservatives and advocates of changes, including those in economic policy. Such discussions have being wages for a quite a long time, and sometimes have been made public. Some publications in the WPK's news outlets contained, inter alia, criticism of unnamed supporters of non-

traditional industrial structure of the country with its emphasis on heavy industry and rejected views of "some people" who were arguing in favor of the transition to the so-called "export model" of development.⁵

As to the conflict of generations within the ruling elite, which may have taken place in the 1980-1990s, it has been by now virtually over for natural reasons: old "partisan" cadres have almost left a political stage. The results of the WPK conferences held in 2010-2012, composition of the WPK's top bodies testified to the fact that remaining representatives of the first and the second generations of "revolutionaries" will compete not for the top position, but for the places among closest aids to Kim Jong-un, who represents the third generation of the incumbent leadership.⁶

Until the purge of Jang Song-thaek Kim Jong-un looked like mainly as the regime's symbol and "face". However, several replacements of the top brass conducted by him during 2012-2013 without any visible signs of resistance indicated that he is unlikely to share power with someone else. He - like his father- Kim Jong-il did after Kim Il-sung's death - would rule alone. There is an absolute leader, the only source of power. Any attempts to establish another center or even to interpret his orders according to somebody's "selfish" wishes will not be tolerated and mercilessly crushed. All other members of the top leadership can compete only for the opportunity to have the Leader's ear more frequently than others and to be credited as successful executors of the Leader's orders and policy.

Two previous decades demonstrated futility of attempts by outside forces to try to detect, single out, the more so to support any person or a group as an alternative to the ruling family. All efforts to crack this unity from the outside have so far proved to be unsuccessful, which ultimately happened to be a key factor of the DPRK's survival as a sovereign entity.

At the grass-root level, like in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, whose political system at the time was very similar to the present-day DPRK, majority of the ordinary North Koreans are still inclined to put the bulk of blame for food shortages, social and economic problems on local officials who are believed have failed to implement in a proper way the directives of the Leader, as well as on "imperialists" and their "flunkies" who make attempts to strangle "the Korean-style socialism".

When assessing severity of food situation in the DPRK one should always keep in mind that the northern part of the peninsula for centuries suffered from lack of food because of climate and other nature's conditions. The North Koreans used to live under very modest rations during almost the whole period of the DPRK's history and well before 1945. Providing decent feeding to the population has never been among top policy priorities neither for local feudal lords nor for Japanese colonial authorities. During the whole period a transparent border with China helped a lot to alleviate the food situation

Taking into consideration both the average age of the incumbent North Korean leadership and the new Leader's obvious low-level tolerance to old-fashioned style of work, it is highly likely to expect the appearance of new people in the next two to three years, or may be even earlier/ at the first SPA session to be held after March 9 elections. Kim Jong-un, if he manages to stay in power for the next several years, is bound to encircle himself with his own hand-picked younger aids.

3. Hard Choices

Probability of radical reforms from "above" like Gorbachev-style perestroika in the USSR almost excluded in North Korea. The DPRK's leaders hardly had been inspired by results of perestroika in the USSR, which led to the removal of the ruling Communist Party and her leader from power and to the country's disintegration.

A "peaceful revolution from below" like in East Europe appears to be also impossible in North Korea because of almost total absence of elements of civil society in the country. All-embracing system of social control and mass mobilization, absence of regular transportation network between the country various regions, available to ordinary people, restrictions of freedom of travel within the country, absence of any media outlets independent from the state make any open mass display of discontent with the official policy impossible.

Absolute rejection by the authorities of "bourgeois" theories of pluralism, division of powers etc. excludes public activity of any organized groups and movements, capable openly to offer to the North Koreans political, economic, social value or programs, different from official ones.

Kim Jong-un in his speech at the Conference of Ideological Workers last February asked them "to make the people turn their backs on the bourgeois ideology" and to conduct its propaganda in an "aggressive manner", including "decisive" measures to use Internet "to cope with enemy moves".⁷ One can expect intensification of activity of comprehensive system of political education, strengthening information control over inflows of information from abroad and struggle against ideas alien to the Korean-style socialism, intensifying control over all spheres of the North Korean society.

In particular, the campaign of struggle against "ideological - cultural penetration of imperialists" will be intensified. Those forces been accused of attempting to introduce by all means into the North Korean society "reactionary bourgeois ideology, culture and rotten way of life". Such expansion was condemned as moves aimed at "realization of imperialists' strategy of the world supremacy".

Propaganda claimed that demise of socialism in the USSR and other socialist countries has taken place not because of their military or economic backwardness but because "ways for imperialism's ideological and cultural expansion were open." The conclusion was made that "the imperialists' yellow wind is more dangerous than a nuclear bomb".

Kim Jong-un's performance in safeguarding the ruling elite's power and in pulling the country out of crisis without making too many concessions to "imperialists" will be the key factor which will determine his political future. Some pronouncements of the new Leader indicate that he understands the gravity of the situation and urgency of addressing his people's everyday needs.⁸

This said, it doesn't preclude new attempts to reinvigorate the country's economy. One of the major implications of the current economic situation is that nowadays the regime can't delay indefinitely solution of urgent economic problems and to continue the "hermit kingdom" policy based mainly on non-economical coercion and ideological indoctrination, further postpone economic reforms.

Experience of the East European countries, especially Romania's events, demonstrated that self-isolation from the challengers the country is faced with proved to be very dangerous and fraught with losing control over the situation with possible transition of the events into unmanned stage of social explosion with high probability of total ousting of the ruling clan from power and its physical extermination.

It seems that nowadays the DPRK's ruling elite is more, than ever before, aware of the hard imperative - in order to survive while deflecting increased international pressure to give up its nuclear program, it is necessary to try new approaches to solution of economic problems. Some pronouncements of the new Leader indicate that he understands the gravity of the situation and urgency of addressing his people's everyday needs.⁹

Among remarkable signs of departure from the former rigid stance were "June 28 measures", decisions to go ahead with a number of steps to restore the work of KIP, establish 14 special trade and industrial zones,

attempts to attract investors from other countries, creation of several governmental and quasi-governmental bodies to promote foreign investment into the country's economy.

Those new trends in north Korea domestic politics coincide with unfolding process of economic integration and globalization in NEA/ This coincidence seems to provide the world community with new instruments for both persuading him to go down this road as well to engage him in a mutually acceptable and beneficial way. Only inviting in honest North Korea to participate in realization of multilateral economic projects in NEA, including those proposed by Russia, can convince Pyongyang that international community had taken on a road leading to the DPRK's gradual and peaceful integration in existing international political and economic order instead of forcing on the country a regime change scenario.

Economic cooperation will help to develop the DPRK's economy; to make the North Koreans more prepared to live in a modern society. In other words, it will help to lessen the existing gap between two parts of the country and to cut unification's cost. During the process, it will help to enlarge in the North ever growing strata of people interested in stable cooperative relations with the outside world. It is highly likely that more active involvement of the DPRK in those processes may bring about positive changes in her international behavior. That's why Russia is in favor of early implementation of multilateral economic cooperation projects on the peninsula.

That doesn't mean at all that Kim Jong-un's leadership will be much more liberal or more inclined to step down from the power. On the contrary, it may well be rather conservative in domestic politics, highly pragmatic and very tough in negotiating for a such settlement formula which would ensure for them an appropriate social status and material well-being in the re-unified Korea.

4. Conclusion

The current long pause in the Six-Party process provide South and North Korea with unique chance through their own combined efforts to size leadership in removing threat of another major conflict, promoting peace and common prosperity. The start of the 21st century proved that an inter-Korean dialogue has all chances to become a major factor to promote security and stability on the Korean peninsula.

The dialogue is vitally necessary to improve the current uneasy situation in the inter-Korean relations. The best option for the Koreans would be to resume working on implementation of the bilateral agreements and understandings reached between South and North Korea at the various talks and contacts held during several previous decades, including those agreed upon at the historical inter-Korean summits of 2000 and 2007.

Moscow's position concerning the inter-Korean rapprochement and its possible results is determined by Russia's national interests whose, certainly, will benefit, first of all, from liquidation of a long-time conflict right next to her Far Eastern region and from founding in the end a unified Korea, capable to maintain relations of friendship, good-neighborhood and cooperation with Russia.

Secondly, better relations between North and South Korea, along with providing Russia with more favorable conditions for development of trade and economic cooperation with both parts of Korea, would open new opportunities for economic development of the Russian Far East and for linking Russia's economy to integration processes in the Asia-Pacific region.

So both on security and economic reasons Russia is vitally interested in peace, reconciliation and unification of Korea. This conclusion seems especially important in view of continuing attempts by some experts to convince public opinion than none of the neighboring countries, including Russia, is interested in Korea unification. Such allegations are aimed at placating some countries' egoistic policy and disguise their attempts to keep their military dominance in the region at any price.

References

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