



## **DPRK SUCCESSION ISSUE AND REGIME TRANSFORMATION**

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Interest in a post-Kim Jong Il regime has been growing ever since questions of the National Defense Committee Chairman's health were thrown into the spotlight in September of last year, and myriad hypotheses regarding Kim's successor and the possibility of regime transformation have been proffered. In particular, the announcement of a constitutional revision and the increase in the number of members on the National Defense Commission (NDC) have led to a number of more specific possibilities. These prospects generally deal with the future position and role of the NDC.

Some point to the fact that the commission "had emerged as the state's central ruling organ for leading the Party-administration-military complex that implements government affairs." Others contend that this theory is too "ROK-centricism" and argue that we should focus our attention on the (North) Korean Workers' Party as the organ that will exact change in the regime and oversee the succession issue.

These days, there is relatively more access to North Korean documents and sources, but still, predicting the North's future lies within the difficult realm of the sociological perspective. There has been limited research in this field, while reports, information and expertise on the topic span a wide range of 'truths,' making analysis difficult. That said, because the post-Kim Jong Il succession scheme and new regime cannot but have significant influence on North Korean transformation and the future of inter-Korean relations, we must not hesitate in the task of predicting and preparing for North Korea's prospective future. This is not to say that none



of the ideas being tossed about have any grain of truth. However, what we need to do is overcome the ‘dogmatism and populism’ of research on North Korea, and to move past the mere ‘gut feelings’ of experts. By recognizing the unique characteristics of North Korean ideology and the possibility of transformation, and keeping in mind the experiences of the North and taking an objective look at conditions in the DPRK, more realistic propositions can be advanced. North Korea’s future is tied with its present and its past, and its prospects need to be seen with an eye for creative transformation.

The North’s political structure is a *Suryong*-centric (leader-centric) Party-state system. Because the political system of socialist states is a party-state system, the party is superior to the military and the administration. In North Korea, the Party is ‘a cohesive body centered on the leader’. Furthermore, the Party can be divided into the ‘leader’ and the ‘party organ’. As such, the leader is superior to the party organ, and the party organ is in a position above that of the military and the administration, meaning that we could say we have a leader-centric Party-state system. It follows, then, that the party organ carries out the central functions of the social-political collective, and as such a political organ, it has a superior position and role to that of the administration and military. However, the leader himself can reign over all three, and furthermore, can reorganize the roles of and relationships between all three as is required by the revolution and its construction. This demonstrates the absolute power of the leader, and of course, any successor would be in at least as absolute a position.

The North’s dynastic succession experience provides significant insight into the Kim Jong II succession issue and the future prospects from the regime. In the beginning of the 1970s, after it was decided that Kim Jong II would succeed his father, a succession framework was built within the Party structure, and in 1980, at the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Kim Jong II was elected to the Politburo Standing Committee and it was officially announced, both within the North and



abroad, that he was to succeed his father. This was a move by Kim Il Sung to systematically guarantee his son's succession, and so at the 6th Congress, the Politburo that had been disbanded at the 5th Congress in 1970 was reestablished, with Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, O Jin Wu, Ri Jong Ok and Kim Il taking seats. As the highest decision-making organ in the state administration, these members took on the responsibility of acting as the guardians of the regime successor.

According to North Korean succession doctrine, the most important condition a successor must meet is devotion to the leader. This devotion in the North essentially means 'the embodiment of Kim Il Sung', and ultimately, is related to 'bloodline succession ideology.' Of course, in this sense, 'bloodline' does not take on a biological sense, but rather, the embodiment of Kim Il Sung's ideology and theories, revolutionary work, fighting experiences, and even business methods. Transfer of power from leader to successor, or from leading collective to any other group, is not easy, but recently, North Korea has been repeatedly emphasizing the call to "firmly carry on the bloodline of *Mangyongdae* (Kim Il Sung's birthplace) and Mount Paektu with our guns." This indicates the decision to have the successor take over with no significant political transformation. In addition, the successor's leadership will be built up through the Party. The working class' party implements the leader's ideology and acts as the political office for continuing the works of the leader, so that the successor's leadership system must be established within the realm of the Party, which lies within the leader's system of guidance.

In North Korea, which professes to be a socialist state, the fact that the successor's leadership must be built up through the Party has been a principle rule during both the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il eras, while one difference between the two regimes is that the building up of a successor that took place *for* Kim Jong Il through the Party's Politburo Standing Committee has not been underway for any successor *to* Kim Jong Il. The Korean Workers' Party decision-



making organs, including the Party Congress, the Central Committee, and the Politburo, have rarely been in session since 1994, and instead, Party activities have been coordinated through the Party Secretariat. This raises the question of what organ will be responsible for building up a successor, now and in the future. Either the Party decision-making organs need to be restored, or this responsibility will need to be shifted to another office, and it appears unlikely that the decision-making organs will be brought back in the future. This has led many to focus attention on the National Defense Commission.

With the constitutional reform of 1998, the NDC became the highest leading organ of state power, and at the same time, as an administrative organ, its central revolutionary organization was strengthened. The NDC did not make decisions for, and issue orders to, only the military, but rather, led every organization, enterprise and association within North Korea. It held all of the power -- including military power -- in the entire country. Since 2007, Ri Myong Su, Kim Yong Chun (Minister, Ministry of People's Armed Forces, February 11, 2009) and other central figures from the military have been appointed to seats on the NDC, as both state and military power continue to be centralized in this commission. Furthermore, the NDC's position and role were considerably strengthened during the 1st plenum of the 12th Supreme People's Committee, which opened on April 9.

The number of seats on the NDC was increased, as was the scope of its authority. At the 1st plenum of the 11th Supreme People's Committee, in 2003, there were nine members, but on April 9 of this year, that was expanded to 13. Five new members were named, as head of the Party operations department, O Kuk Ryol, was named vice-chairman, and Jang Song Taek, Ju Sang Song, U Tong Chuk, Ju Kyu Chang and Kim Jong Gak were named to the commission, while Choi Ryong Su was not reappointed. Ju Kyu Chang, director of Munitions Industry, Office No. 1, was involved in the latest North Korean rocket launch, and it is assumed that Kim

Jong Gak was appointed to counsel the aged Jo Myong Rok, and that Ju Sang Song was appointed to replace Choi Ryong Su. A particular point of interest was the appointment of the non-military members, head of the Party administration department Jang Song Taek and Chief of Staff U Tong Chuk, who is actually responsible for the State Security Department.

It is also worth noting that the make-up of this NDC includes leaders from the Party administration department, State Security Department, Ministry of People's Security, and the military's chief political office, as well as Jang Song Taek, who is known to be closely related to the succession issues. These changes practically put the leadership into the hands of several members belonging to the 2nd generation of the revolution, all at least four years younger than Kim Jong Il (67), including Paek Se Bong, Jang Sung Taek, Kim Jong Gak, plus graduates of the Mangyongdae Revolutionary School (Jang Song Taek, O Kuk Ryol, and Kim Yong Chun).

Furthermore, North Korea announced a revision to its constitution, but did not release any details as to how it had been changed. When the authority of the National Defense Commissioner was strengthened through the 1992 constitutional reform, that, too, was not immediately publicized. This raises questions as to whether the latest change is related to the succession issue, the establishment of the National Defense Commission, or some other realignment of government organs. On a related note, on April 10, the Party mouthpiece *Rodong Sinmun*, and the administrative mouthpiece *Minju Chosun* released a picture of the entire NDC with an air of self-confidence.

The picture displayed the NDC's capacity to act as the central organ for crisis control, regime preservation, and the succession issue. It could be that as time goes by and Kim Jong Il's power wanes, he is seeking to ensure the structural integrity of the leading regime and the succession system by moving away from the vertical, Kim Jong Il-centric regime and seeking a



collective leadership system. Ultimately, a state administration system provisionally led by the collective NDC; i.e., a ‘succession through the Party plus NDC successor group (2nd generation revolution)’ picture is emerging. It is here that the culmination of the ‘Party (organ)’s position above the military and administration’ and the ‘absoluteness of the leader’ emerges. Whenever there has been internal or external crises, ranging back to the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592, civil-military joint organ created by military authorities wielded all decision-making power over the government. That said, whenever hostilities calmed, this organ would be disbanded. In the same manner, with the coming 2012 anniversary of the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Kim Il Sung and the possible official naming of a successor, whether the next leader of the North will be chosen by the NDC, given a chair on the Supreme People’s Committee Standing Committee, whether a symbolic position within the Party will be created or whether an altogether new organ will be established will depend on whether or not Kim Jong Il can wield influence over the decision, and will also be impacted by changes in both the domestic and international environments.