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## Time for the Strategy of Coevolution: How South Korea Can Shape the Future of the Kim Jong-un Regime

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### After 20 years: North Korea in 2032

2012 is a critical time for North Korea as it has proclaimed that from this year it will achieve the status of a “strong and prosperous nation.” With Kim Jong-il’s death in December 2011, this immense task now falls upon the shoulders of Kim Jong-un. For the past seventeen years under Kim Jong-il’s rule, North Korea has tried to seek a way to ensure its regime’s survival and guarantee its national security through *Songun* or military-first politics and the possession of nuclear weapons. Yet, this has actually resulted in international isolation, economic hardships, and an overdependence on China. For North Korea, it was “lost two decades”. It is natural to wonder about what kind of impact Kim Jong-il’s sudden death will have on North Korea in the short run. However, it is more important now to think carefully about what lies ahead for North Korea over the next 20 years under Kim Jong-un’s rule. Upon such a consideration it is also critical to prepare necessary measures in terms of this long-term perspective.

The most urgent priority for the newly established Kim Jong-un regime is domestic stability, which means that the regime will have to pursue the legacy of Kim Jong-il’s rule. In this respect, it will continue to possess nuclear weapons, seek economic gains from negotiations over its nuclear program, and attempt to accelerate its economic development under the banner of a “strong and prosperous nation” to gain political legitimacy. So long as Kim

Jong-un sticks to “rule by his deceased father’s will,” then North Korea will face the inevitable dilemma it has faced for the last seventeen years. Pursuing regime security by huddling onto nuclear weapons will only continue to ensure Pyongyang’s international isolation. This isolation in turn brings about economic hardship, which consequently has a negative effect on the stability of the Kim Jong-un regime as its legitimacy is still rather weak. These interlinked problems of domestic politics, diplomacy, and economics can be easily locked in a vicious circle.

The Kim Jong-un regime must deal with these pending issues in line with a long-term strategy that will guarantee its survival and help North Korea pursue reforms to meet the norms of the twenty-first century civilization. The first stage of this long-term strategy is to seek a policy shift. At some point in the future, Kim Jong-un has to make the strategic decision to give up nuclear weapons and switch from the current military-first politics to economy-first politics. Of course, such a shift is an extremely difficult decision to make, but it would be a good chance to prove the strength of Kim Jong-un’s leadership internally and externally. The second stage is transition and reform. With this step, North Korea will finally take measures toward peaceful development under the basis of a more enlightened *Suryong* or Great Leader Direct Rule system.<sup>1</sup> Those measures include overcoming the demands for excessive security, moving forward to establish a security system without

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nuclear weapons, and plan for a North Korean-way of reforms and opening. In order to achieve these goals, North Korea will truly require support from South Korea and the international community. The third stage is the transformation of North Korea to meet the international standard of advancement. In this stage, it is crucial to find a way to encourage North Korea to transform into a nation that seeks moderate security capabilities as well as a new momentum for economic development, democracy, and normal diplomacy. If it succeeds, North Korea could then become a model country which serves for peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula and contribute toward development and stability in Northeast Asia.

During this delicate period, it is an imperative to get over single-minded approaches to focus only on the collapse of North Korea or to call for the one-sided effort of either North Korea or the international community to resolve all the issues. Furthermore, it is time to understand the broad range of problems of North Korea and seek a path of coevolution which takes in a bigger picture of peace and stability for not only the Korean Peninsula but also East Asia.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Short-Term Stability of the Kim Jong-un Regime**

It is clear that the North Korean leadership has made preparations for this power transition. The 2012 Joint New Year Editorial stated, “Glorify this year 2012 as a year of proud victory, a year when an era of prosperity is unfolding, true to the instructions of the great General Kim Jong Il.”<sup>3</sup> This shows that, as expected, the Kim Jong-un regime will at-

tempt to deal with domestic and foreign issues based on Kim Jong-il’s military first politics.

The Kim Jong-un regime will likely show solid stability in the short term, indicative that it has a stronger political power base than some people had expected. During the mourning period for Kim Jong-il’s death, Kim Jong-un was proclaimed the supreme commander of both the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) and Korean People’s Army (KPA). He leads the WPK with the support of Jang Song Thaek (65, Administration Department Director), Kim Kyong Hui (65, Member of the Political Bureau), Choe Ryong Hae (62, Member of the Central Military Commission), Kim Ki Nam (85, Secretariat), and Choe Thae Bok (81, Secretariat). As supreme commander, he will lead the KPA through Ri Yong Ho (69, Vice-Chairmen of Central Military Commission), Kim Jong Gak (70, Senior Deputy Director of Ministry of People’s Armed Forces (MPAF) General Political Department), Kim Yong Chun (76, Minister of the MPAF), and U Tong Chuk (69, Senior Deputy of State Security Department). During the National Memorial Service for Kim Jong-il on December 29, 2011, Kim Jong-un was referred to in the official media as “the dear respected Kim Jong Un, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the WPK and supreme leader of the WPK state and army.”<sup>4</sup> And at the Political Bureau meeting of the WPK’s Central Committee held on December 30, 2011, Kim Jong-un assumed supreme commandship of the KPA at the “behest of leader Kim Jong-il on October 8, 2011.”<sup>5</sup> Also during the memorial address, Kim Yong Nam, President of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly, proclaimed the next leadership and its core policy by saying “We will accomplish the cause of the *Songun* revolutionary cause, the

cause of building a thriving socialist nation, holding Kim Jong Un in high esteem as another General and supreme leader.”<sup>6</sup>

The Kim Jong-un regime has to focus on consolidating its power base through utilizing the slogan at the “behest of Kim Jong-il” as its most valuable political asset. Kim Jong-il did exactly the same when he came to power after the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. As the third generation of leadership succession from father to son, the Kim Jong-un regime has serious limits in creating its legitimacy. Therefore, the regime has to rely on and begin its rule with the slogan of at the “behest of Kim Jong-il,” as well as continue with Kim Jong-il’s military-first politics. The Kim Jong-un regime still lacks the political strength that could help it to manage any possible instability caused if it makes a sudden shift in North Korea’s political and economic future.

Moreover, Kim Jong-un has to embrace the existing military and political elites who tend to favor hard-line policies toward South Korea. Even if he genuinely has a will to carry out reforms and opening of the economy, it would be unthinkable to implement those policies if he lacks the political strength to make his own decisions in terms of domestic politics. This means that he needs to be viewed as the legitimate ruler of North Korea in the eyes of the people as well as the political elites. The importance of this legitimacy was reflected in the 2012 Joint New Year Editorial which emphasized, “Let us do many more things for the benefit of the people!” and “Officials should be deeply aware that they exist for the sake of the people, have the steadfast standpoint of launching all undertakings in keeping with the will and interests of the people.”<sup>7</sup> Related to this effort to gain legitimacy, Kim Jong-un has been taking up haw-

kish measures toward South Korea. This reminds us of the situation following Kim Il-sung’s death in 1994 when inter-Korean relations became strained as both sides pursued hard-line policies toward each other. On December 25, 2011, North Korea’s Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland released a statement manifesting that North Korea will decide its policy toward South Korea based upon Seoul’s stance on allowing condolence visits to Pyongyang. This point also came up in the Joint New Year Editorial where North Korea lashed out against “conservative ruling forces in south Korea” for “hindering in every possible way the offering of condolence.”<sup>8</sup> However, it is a little bit premature to conclude from this that the Kim Jong-un regime will attempt military provocations or raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula. China, the sole patron for North Korea’s stability, has been strongly and openly opposed to North Korea “taking any risks” since late 2010. In any case, North Korea itself needs a stable international environment in order to focus on domestic events such as the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong-il’s birth on February 16, 2012, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Il-sung’s birth on April 15, 2012.

The key concern is how the Kim Jong-un regime will make its next move after it has managed to establish legitimacy and stability in the short run. Kim Il-sung’s political assets and “will” were only effective in a limited way during the seventeen years of Kim Jong-il’s rule. It is then questionable whether Kim Jong-il’s legacy will be effective during the Kim Jong-un era. Would Kim Jong-un be able to make the strategic decision to carry out his own model of long-term survival based on a thorough understanding of North Korea’s current situation? The critical moment for this

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would be around 2015, which will be the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the WPK and when Kim Jong-un may officially bring to an end the “rule by his deceased father’s will.” In this case, will North Korea be able to evolve?

### **The Long-Term Dilemma of the Military-First Politics**

As long as the Kim Jong-un regime sticks to Kim Jong-il’s system of military-first politics, there will be no way to solve North Korea’s long-standing triple dilemma. The “unholy trinity” among securing legitimacy in domestic politics, stabilizing the international environment by resolving the nuclear crisis, and alleviating the economic hardships is all inter-linked in mutually contradicting ways. What Kim Jong-il’s rule clearly showed is that it is impossible to sustain the totalitarian *Suryong* system with nuclear weapons while also attempting to resolve chronic economic difficulties. Kim Jong-il believed that he could only maintain the *Suryong* system by possessing nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons though only intensified a worsening economic crisis at home. However, after seventeen years of military-first politics, it has now become difficult to sustain the *Suryong* system without the possession of nuclear weapons. This pursuit of excessive security has also led to a failure in resource distribution. As it stands now, giving up nuclear weapons in order to make an advance in economic development will jeopardize the whole *Suryong* system.

In 2012, Kim Jong-un’s attempt to gain political legitimacy through inheriting military-first politics will only achieve short-term results. Kim Jong-un will face tremendous

pressure to make changes in the near future on account of the following three reasons. First, international pressure over the nuclear program will grow. Up until now, Pyongyang has managed to walk a thin line between possessing nuclear weapons and negotiations that requires giving them up. North Korea hasn’t been able to give up a security guaranteed by nuclear weapons nor gain economic support from the international community. But this situation cannot go on indefinitely. The regime will face weaker political legitimacy and a devastating outcome caused by ongoing economic difficulties. Due to various factors, including North Korea’s domestic challenges and the requests of Beijing seeking stability on the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang has no choice but to come forward to the negotiating table in the near future. Although the international community including the United States is now prioritizing a stable power transition to Kim Jong-un, they will eventually pressure North Korea to follow up on its commitments to denuclearize.

Second, the ongoing economic difficulties will eventually become a threatening factor for regime stability. It is very likely that North Korea will never be able to accomplish its goal of becoming a “strong and prosperous nation.” Without large scale support from the outside world, not even a moderate level of economic development would be possible, which could be used by Kim Jong-un to consolidate his legitimacy. The regime’s stability will continue to be challenged by popular involvement in the unofficial markets which emerged following the collapse of the public distribution system during the great famine of the 1990s. In this context, possessing nuclear weapons and sustaining military-first politics would only aggravate dissatisfaction among

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the people and increase the possibility that a certain group could gain enough momentum to eventually challenge the regime.

Third, the long-term stability of the regime is only possible when North Korea embarks upon a path of reform and opening. China has already begun to pressure North Korea to take this path. Politically as well, Kim Jong-un needs to emphasize his own legacy which must be differentiated from his grandfather's *Juche* or ideology of self-reliance and his father's military-first politics. Considering the current situation in North Korea, this should be focused on growth and development. Military first politics needs to be adjusted for the sake of advancing light-industry and improving the people's standard of living, which have been economic targets emphasized by the regime for years. In order to achieve this reform and opening, however, Pyongyang's closed and autocratic political system has to be able to cope with pressures from an open society. This means that the *Suryong* system should be transformed from a totalitarian dictatorship to an enlightened and benevolent supreme leader. In the end, the Kim Jong-un regime will face a crossroads in its strategic decisions. The regime will have to choose whether to take the same path of military-first politics and become a vegetative state or take the prudent path of a North Korean-way of reforms and opening.

### **South Korea and the Strategy of Coevolution**

From 2012, South Korea will need to remain vigilant on leadership transition in North Korea and establish short-term, mid-term, and long-term plans to meet this challenge. The current government in Seoul should refine its

policy package to the Kim Jong-un regime under the framework of a long-term strategy which can also serve as a foundation for the next administration due to be inaugurated in early 2013. Candidates for the next presidential election should compete with each other to establish a paradigm of non-partisan North Korea policy. The past dichotomy of either the Sunshine policy or the principled engagement policy is no longer valid in the 2010s thus a third way of policy alternatives needs to be developed. Along with this effort, it is also important to carefully manage public opinion in South Korea so as to avoid conflict within society over policies to North Korea.

The immediate strategic message that Seoul should deliver to Pyongyang is that the strategic decision made by the Kim Jong-un regime will be the key to not only the survival and development of North Korea but also to new models of governance and unification on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, it is important to make clear that Seoul will also co-evolve with Pyongyang on a mutual vision for the advancement of North Korea and make genuine efforts to persuade the international community to join this co-evolutionary path. The primary recipient of this message is, of course, key figures in the Kim Jong-un regime, but in the long run, will be aimed at all possible reformist forces in North Korea which have the will to co-evolve with South Korea and international community. For the political elites and people in North Korea who are stuck in the *Suryong* system and closed socialist system unable to see the path of advancement, South Korea should present specific blueprints for the future of the Korean Peninsula.

For the mid-term, the South Korean government needs to prepare policy alternatives

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for North Korea which faces in the near future the triple dilemma mentioned before. Above all, measures to resolve the nuclear issue should be prepared. In perceiving the nuclear challenge as a political issue that is related to the Kim Jong-un regime’s survival, Seoul has to devise a way to guarantee the regime’s security while at the same time, present reasonable conditions for Pyongyang to engage in denuclearization. By taking this opportunity of Kim Jong-il’s death, the Six-Party Talks should function as a multilateral framework to deal with the overall North Korean problem, not simply focused on nuclear issues. In this context, the South Korean government could think about an active and forward-looking approach that decouples the Six-Party Talks from the difficult issues in inter-Korean relations, such as South Korea’s demands for an apology for North Korea’s provocations in 2010.

Second, a strategy for building a peace system on the Korean Peninsula is also important. Until now, talks on a peace system have not reached any agreement as Seoul and Pyongyang have approached this issue with different strategic goals. In particular, North Korea has insisted upon the same old measures that include ending the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Asia, withdrawal of United States Forces in Korea, and redrawing the maritime border in the West Sea. However, it is time for North Korea to develop different strategic goals with this peace system issue for the Korean Peninsula. As Pyongyang is faced with the situation that without fundamental change it will not survive in the near future, the peace system should be approached with the perception that it can be a new way to guarantee its own survival.

South Korea also needs to move away from its perception that the peace system issue

is only an excuse by North Korea to evade its obligations for denuclearization. Rather, Seoul should approach this issue strategically by using it to encourage the Kim Jong-un regime to change its developmental model from the military-first politics to an economy-first politics. With patience and sincerity, Seoul needs to persuade Pyongyang that nuclear weapons cannot guarantee the regime’s survival. Only under a complex network of security guarantees from the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and the United Nations, could the regime finally secure its survival and stability. Also massive economic support from the international community as a reward for giving up its nuclear program could help Pyongyang to finally accomplish the vision of a “strong and prosperous nation” which Kim Jong-il had failed to achieve. In the end, true peace in inter-Korean relations can only come about when a peace system on the Korean Peninsula is established with an agreement between Washington and Beijing on the survival of the North Korean regime and a regional multilateral peace system in Northeast Asia.

When this mid-term goal has been accomplished, it will be possible to pursue the long-term goal of the advancement of North Korea beyond normalization. However, the challenge remains that Pyongyang has never taken such a path before. North Korea should be transformed into a democratic system and meet the standard of a twenty-first-century civilization which is a powerful country of knowledge, culture, environment, and economy rather than just a “strong and prosperous nation.” South Korea and North Korea could then be an equal partner in building a more peaceful Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia once North Korea has reached this level of advancement.

## South Korea as the Facilitator for the International Evolution of North Korea Policy

The future of North Korea is linked to the international politics of Northeast Asia. Blueprints for the future of the Korean Peninsula cannot be separated from the future architecture in East Asia. Although South Korea is not a great power and cannot be the main designer of regional architecture, it can be a middle power which takes on the initiative in drawing the future of the Korean Peninsula that will have an impact on the shape of the region. Therefore the advancement of North Korea is important not only for the future of the Korean Peninsula but also for the status of South Korean diplomacy in the region. This is both a test and an opportunity.

U.S.-China relations will be the most critical variable that determines the future of the Korean Peninsula for at least the next 10 years. North Korea, and more broadly the Korean Peninsula, is a stage of competition and conflict between the two countries: a rising China trying to make East Asia as its base for peaceful development and a relatively declining United States which seeks to restore its regional hegemonic influence. The conflict between Washington and Beijing in 2010 settled down following the U.S.-China summit meeting in January 2011. The United States agreed to respect China's "core interests" and China acknowledged the U.S. policy to reengage the region. Since the summit meeting, the East Asia strategy of the United States has become more specified. It is seeking to strengthen relations with Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, and Myanmar as well as raise its voice on multilateralism in East Asia through the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the East Asia Summit. Along with these efforts, Wash-

ington has also reinforced its alliance relations with Seoul and Tokyo, and has even emphasized trilateral cooperation among its alliance partners. The United States is redesigning the security-economy architecture of East Asia.

China is closely watching these developments and is trying to check the movements of the United States in the region. It is expected then that North Korea will be the place where Washington and Beijing will clash over its future direction. While both countries prioritize the status quo, they will cautiously respond to changes if North Korea becomes over dependent on one side. Particularly, the Chinese leadership would be very reluctant to allow North Korea's future to be influenced by South Korea and United States, an outcome that could then be used to check China on its periphery.

Both Washington and Beijing have been taking a wait and see approach by supporting the status quo in North Korea after the death of Kim Jong-il. However, each of side has been carefully considering how to shape their future moves. From the beginning, China has sent a "clear and decisive" message of support to Kim Jong-un.<sup>9</sup> All nine members of China's ruling Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee made a morning visit to the North Korean Embassy in Beijing and confirmed their strong will to support the Kim Jong-un regime. At the same time, the United States reaffirmed its strong commitment to the stability of the Korean Peninsula and the security of its close ally, South Korea, and emphasized a "peaceful and stable transition." In its following statements, Washington expressed its priority for its North Korea policy as follows: peaceful and stable transition; the commitment of the new leadership to honor North Korea's agreements on denuclearization; im-

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proving relations with its neighbors; respecting the rights of its people.

When there is conflict between the United States and China over the North Korean issue, South Korea should not take an opportunistic approach which would certainly end in failure. Rather, Seoul should be able to persuade both Washington and Beijing by using the North Korea issue to highlight that if both sides insist upon their own blueprint for East Asian architecture, all the countries in the region including them will suffer. South Korea, as a middle power at the heart of the architecture of the great powers, should find its own way to establish a new vision that benefits all stakeholders in the region. In line with this effort, South Korea should also prepare discourse and logic on the future of North Korea and a specific policy package for the coevolution of North Korea and the international community.

In the short-term, the South Korean government will face many questions on its long-term strategy toward North Korea from the United States, Japan, and in particular China as the ROK-China summit meeting is scheduled to take place in late January 2012. What South Korea wants from the future of North Korea has a lot in common with what the United States and China wants: denuclearization, reform and opening, and a normalized and advanced North Korea which contributes to the development of the region. The problem is how to come up with realistic and specific policies to accomplish this transformation of North Korea. Along with this, the capability to adjust the interests of neighboring countries and promote strong international cooperation on North Korea should not be affected by the domestic political situation in each country, is also required.

It is noteworthy that Pyongyang emphasized the importance of its relationship with both Beijing and Moscow in the Joint New Year Editorial of 2012. This shows that the Kim Jong-un regime intends to take advantage of competition between Washington and Beijing over architecture building in East Asia. Were the Six-Party Talks to resume without a compromise in any of the party's conflicting interests, it would be hard to see how there would be any improvement in the denuclearization of North Korea. In order to limit the influence of great powers in shaping the future of North Korea and the Korean Peninsula, the South Korean government should engage in sincere dialogue with Beijing.

South Korea's future moves will have a tremendous impact on the future of the Korean Peninsula and the region. By recognizing the significance of this opportunity, Seoul should carry out the specific measures of the strategy of coevolution while harmonizing its efforts to promote a North Korea policy of the international community and endeavor to contribute to a new architecture in East Asia. ■

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- <sup>1</sup> [Translator's Note] *Suryong* holds supreme power over decision making in North Korea, see Kim, Kap-sik. 2008. "Suryong's Direct Rule and the Political Regime in North Korea under Kim Jong-il," *Asian Perspective* 32, 3: 90
- <sup>2</sup> See the roadmap proposed in Young-Sun Ha and Dongho Jo, 2010, *Future of North Korea: 2032: Coevolutionary Strategy for the Advancement*, Seoul: East Asia Institute.
- <sup>3</sup> Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), 2012, "Joint New Year Editorial," January 1.
- <sup>4</sup> KCNA, 2011, "Solemn National Memorial Service for Kim Jong Il Held," December 29.
- <sup>5</sup> KCNA, 2011, "Kim Jong Un Assumes KPA Supreme Commandership," December 31.
- <sup>6</sup> KCNA, 2011, December 29.
- <sup>7</sup> KCNA, 2012, January 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> *Global Times*, 2011, "China must ensure smooth NK transition," December 20.  
<http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/689153/China-must-ensure-smooth-NK-transition.aspx>