

KIM JONG UN'S NORTH KOREA: WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT?

The era of Kim Jong Il ended abruptly when on the 17th December 2011 the Dear Leader died – allegedly, on a countryside inspection tour. His son, 28 years old Kim Jong Un, perhaps the world's youngest four-star general, was instantly made the Supreme Commander of the North Korean armed forces and was extolled by the media as the Supreme Leader of the North Korean state. In April he was appointed to the First Chairmanship in the National Defense Committee and also made First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party. So far, it seems, the power transition has appeared to be smooth.

The emergence of the new leader in the world's only communist monarchy has made many observers wonder about the future and speculate about coming change.

Indeed, the situation in North Korea might change eventually. Nonetheless, as we will try to demonstrate in this article, there is good reason to believe that for the next few years, at least, we will see the continuation of the existing set of policies. Some faces at the top might change, and new rhetoric is likely to be introduced, but the essence of regime is likely to remain the same.

The short term prospects – same people, same policies, same problems

Perhaps the most surprising thing about developments in Pyongyang of late is the complete absence of surprises. From at least late 2010, a majority of North Korean watchers expected that the eventual death of Kim Jong Il would lead to the emergence of Kim Jong Un as a figurehead leader. It was predicted that at the early stages of his rule he would be assisted and, to an extent, controlled by a board of elder advisers in which his uncle Chang SongTaek and the chief of staff

of the Korean People's Army Lee Yong Ho would play a major role.¹ These predictions have seemingly been proven correct, which is a rare feat in the treacherous world of Pyongyang watching.

Due to some unknown reasons, Kim Jong Il postponed the preparations for his eventual demise and power transition until very late. Such preparations began earnestly only in 2009, soon after Kim Jong Il's serious stroke. Nonetheless, up until the last moment Marshal Kim and his advisors seemingly assumed that they would have a few good years at their disposal to complete the power transition.

It is often overlooked that Kim Jong Un had not been explicitly proclaimed the successor to his father. At the moment of Kim Jong Il's death, Kim Jong Un was technically merely a four-star general, one of a dozen top military officers, four-star generals, vice-marshals and marshals of the Korean People's Army (even though, admittedly, by far the youngest of them all). He was also a vice-chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, a rather obscure part of the Korean Workers' Party structure, which has had played little political role since the mid-1970s. Obviously it was assumed that in the near future Kim Jong Un would be finally proclaimed successor and officially made second-in-command to his father.

It might be surmised that Kim Jong Un's official promotion to a heir designate was initially scheduled to take place amidst the expected gala celebrations of Kim Il Sung's 100th Birthday in April 2012. However, Kim Jong Il died before these plans could be brought to fruition. Nonetheless, immediately after his death, the North Korean media professed unconditional loyalty to Kim Jong Un, around whom the people of North Korea were urged to rally around. To the best of our knowledge, there were no suspicious happenings in Pyongyang: it appears as if all

¹ For one of such predictions, see: Peter Beck, "What Is Kim Jong Il Up to Now?" *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, 24 November 2010, p.13.

key members of the North Korean top leadership immediately accepted Kim Jong Un as their new boss, and at the funeral of Kim Jong Il he was surrounded by the people who had long been expected to become key members of his entourage. The 4th Conference of the Korean Workers Party in April also confirmed that no dramatic changes in the personal composition of the leadership has taken place, even though it seems that known associates of Chang Song Taek have strengthened their position in Pyongyang.

This is somewhat unusual, since in most other dictatorships, such an embarrassingly young and politically inexperienced dictator would almost certainly face a challenge from within the inner circle. One can surmise that this unanimous acceptance of Kim Jong Un is motivated by two major factors: first, the North Korean decision makers are aware that any instability might have grave consequences for all members of the elite; secondly we must remember that the death of Kim Jong Il has not changed the personal constitution of North Korea's top leadership.

The Pyongyang regime finds itself in a peculiar and potentially unstable situation which has resulted from the existence of affluent and successful South Korea. The per capita income gap between North and South is almost twenty-fold (and many scholars believe it might be even higher).²

² For details on the ongoing argument over the actual size of North Korean GDP, see

I Chong-sok, "Pukhankukminsotukchaepyongka [Reassessment of the National Income of North Korea]," *Chongsewachongchaek*, no. 3 (2008), pp. 1–4.

For the most recent available estimates of the gap, see

2011 Pukhan-ũichuyot'onggyechip'yo [Major Statistical Indicators for North Korea, 2011] (Seoul: National Statistics Office, 2012), p.1

This yawning gap makes the position of the elite in Pyongyang rather different from that of post-Communist reformers in Hanoi and Beijing. The leadership of North Korea believes – with good reason – that they must maintain strict control over their populace in order to maintain their power and the trappings that come with it. In the case of instability or relaxation, the North Korean people are likely to learn of the true extent of South Korean prosperity (unbelievable by North Korean standards, but still unknown to a majority of the North Koreans), and the populace will also become less fearful of the authorities. Therefore, such a loss of control is likely to give rise to conditions in which a rise of grassroots pro-unification movement becomes probable. In such an eventuality, somewhat similar to developments in East Germany in 1989-1991, the entire North Korean elite will be doomed, irrespectively of stylistic and substantive differences in policy preferences which might divide the Pyongyang decision makers.

This ingrained and well-founded fear of domestic instability is what makes North Korea's decision makers extremely cautious. This is the fundamental reason why they are likely to avoid any potentially destabilizing confrontation. In the average dictatorship, a possible challenger believes that, if successful, he might replace the weak dictator at the top of a power structure. In the peculiar case of North Korea, a successful challenger might still lose everything, since the challenge itself might trigger a chain of events which in a quick succession destroys the entire system and, for that matter, even North Korean state.

Even if a hypothetical coup against Kim Jong Un were to succeed, it is likely to produce much instability. This instability could easily escalate and lead to regime collapse in a relatively short period of time. If this is to happen, both winners and losers will lose power and will conceivably find themselves in the same prison cells being investigated for their role in the human rights abuses of the Kim family era. Therefore, the North Korean elite will not rock the boat: whatever their private thoughts are of the embarrassingly young Supreme Leader, these people are likely to keep the appearance of unity. They might fight between themselves, especially if they keep their confrontation hidden from the common folks, but they are unlikely to challenge the person

who was anointed by the Dear Leader Kim Jong Il and who has such a striking resemblance of the country's founding father Great Leader Kim Il Sung.

So far it appears that Kim Jong Il's death has not led to any significant personal changes among the top leadership. The people who are running North Korea now are the same people who have played the decisive role in North Korean decision-making in the last 10 to 15 years. Therefore, to expect much in the way of change in Pyongyang's domestic and foreign policy for the time being is not wise. It will take some time before Kim Jong Un establishes his own power base and in the meantime he will have no choice but to follow the suggestions of his advisors, who are unlikely to discard the Kim Jong Il era policies which they once formulated and executed. And, frankly, they have little in the way of compelling reasons to discard these policies, since after all, these policies have fared well in insuring the regime survival against tough odds.

What we should expect in the near future

What are the major policies the new – or, actually, not so new – regime in Pyongyang is likely to follow?

On the international front, Pyongyang's immediate policy goal is to ensure the resumption of large scale South Korean and American aid. Domestically, they will work hard to ensure the stability of their regime.

Contrary to what has often been stated, the North Korean state does not need South Korean or US aid because it is desperate and faces an economic disaster. A few years ago, one could frequently come across statements to the effect that 'sanctions are beginning to bite'. That was the suggestion that international sanctions would drive North Korean leaders to desperate measures, i.e. make them surrender their nuclear program in order to get reprieve from the mounting economic difficulties. Not much along these lines has been heard recently, and with

good reason: since the introduction of international sanctions in 2006, North Korea's macro-economic indicators have improved and continue to do so, albeit with occasional lapses into recession and negative economic growth.

Nonetheless, since the discontinuation of large-scale South Korean and US aid in 2008, the North Korean state has become extremely dependent on just one sponsor – China. This dependency goes against the instincts and experiences of North Korea's decision makers. Since the Sino-Soviet split, the North Korean government has tried to keep at least two sponsors, whose relationship should be strained and preferably hostile. This is a sound strategy: it gives North Korean diplomats room to maneuver, allowing them to squeeze concessions concurrently from feuding sponsor states, without giving neither of them much in return.

The current aid dependency on China alone is, therefore, worrisome for North Korea's leadership. Thus far Pyongyang leaders have ensured that this economic dependency has not translated into socio-political influence, but they cannot discount the possibility that China will try to leverage its economic domination over the North in the political realm.³ Therefore, the immediate goal of the North Korean leadership is to insure the eventual resumption of large-scale unconditional aid from countries other than China – above all, they are interested in the US and ROK aid which was abruptly halted in 2008. This aid should be generous and unconditional. As Noland and Haggard observed recently, "General economic inducements, such as the lifting of sanctions, entry into international financial institutions (IFIs), or more formalized regional cooperation, have never been as appealing to the North Korean leadership as proponents of

³For a detailed and sophisticated analysis of China's attitude to North Korean actions of the last years, see:

Jooyoung Song, "Understanding China's Response to North Korea's Provocations: The Dual Threats Model," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (March/April 2011), pp. 1134-1155.

engagement have believed. The regime has always favored targeted transfers that can be directly controlled by the leadership, including food aid, heavy fuel oil shipments, or cash payments.”⁴In order to bring this about, the North Korean leaders are likely to follow two sets of policies, one targeting the ROK and the other the US.

In dealing with the South, it seems that a new North Korean leadership has pinned its hopes on the electoral victory of South Korean ‘progressives’ (even though they must have been disappointed by the results of the parliamentary elections in April where the South Korean Left did not fare well enough). North Korea’s leaders assume that such a victory – by no means impossible – will lead to the resumption of aid on a scale more or less commensurate with the times of the “Sunshine policy”. These expectations might be overblown, but indeed it seems that South Korean ‘progressives’ are more likely to be generous with aid than their ‘conservative’ opponents.

Therefore one might expect that in the immediate future, the North Korean government will refrain from undertaking any provocative military actions on the DMZ or NLL. As the Cheonan incident demonstrated, such incidents in the short run tend to lead to a massive upsurge in anti-Pyongyang feelings among South Korean voters. Needless to say such sentiments play to ‘conservatives’, who take a more hardline approach to the North. Of course, provocations cannot be ruled out completely, and now, after the parliamentary success of the ‘conservatives’, the North might even consider punishing the South Korean voters by staging another provocation. Nonetheless, it would make more sense to refrain from actions which will strengthen the hardliners’ case.

⁴Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, “Sanctioning North Korea: The Political Economy of Denuclearization and Proliferation,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (May/Jun 2010), p. 540.

At the same time, there are very slim chances of the North Korean government engaging in high-level talks with the South. If the incumbent 'conservative' administration succeeds in luring the North into negotiations, this will be presented as a major victory for the conservative method of dealing with the North. Such a success will no doubt be used by the 'conservatives' in their electoral campaign with great efficiency, since their 'progressive' opponents often insist that 'conservatives' are ineffectual in dealing with the North. Therefore it makes sense for the leadership in the North to bide its time in dealing with the South and even use increasingly hostile rhetoric in regard to the South Korean leaders. If this helps 'progressives' toward their electoral victory then Pyongyang will be satisfied. But if the 'progressives' will be unsuccessful in December 2012, the North will still try to acquire aid from the post-Lee MyungBak 'conservative' administration.

In dealing with the US, Pyongyang's goal is likely to be the same – i.e. the resumption of large-scale and, preferably, unconditional aid. However, the way the new North Korean leadership goes about attempting to achieve this goal are likely to be different.

First of all, in the long run North Korean diplomats are likely to pursue negotiations with the US. They might make some concessions, largely of a symbolic and reversible kind, in order to demonstrate their 'willingness' to undertake denuclearization in some unspecified but distant future. In return, they hope to get food aid and other monetary rewards.

However, such an approach has serious limitations. The North Korean government has no serious reason or intention to talk about denuclearization. They believe that nuclear arms are the major safeguard against foreign invasion and/or intervention into a domestic crisis. The sorry fates of both Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi could not help but strengthen their belief in the need for a nuclear deterrent. If anything, the recent events in Libya confirmed these assumptions. On March 22, 2011 the KCNA, North Korean official news agency quoted a spokesman for the DPRK Foreign Ministry as saying: "The present Libyan crisis teaches the

international community a serious lesson. It was fully exposed before the world that ‘Libya's nuclear dismantlement’ much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as ‘guarantee of security’ and ‘improvement of relations’ to disarm itself and then swallowed it up by force. It proved once again the truth of history that peace can be preserved only when one builds up one's own strength as long as high-handed and arbitrary practices go on in the world.”⁵

They also need nuclear weapons as a powerful tool for diplomatic blackmail. Without nuclear problem, no one would pay much attention to the North, essentially an impoverished Third world dictatorship, whose economy is smaller in scale than Ghana's or Mozambique's.

Right now, it appears, North Korea is on the tension building stage of its usual strategic cycle (first create a crisis and then get concessions for becoming less aggressive). Pyongyang's decision to renege on the so-called ‘Leap Day Agreement’ just two weeks after it was signed was surprising and its reasons are open to interpretation. Some bureaucratic inefficiency or factional strife might be the cause, but this decision might reflect a well-planned strategy as well. By doing so, Pyongyang might wish to show that the North Korean leadership is not going to make serious concessions in exchange for a paltry 240,000 ton of food which were promised as a part of the ‘Leap Day Agreement’, and hope to get much more eventually.

As a way to build up tension, North Korea tried a satellite launch, which, as usual, was a failure. A nuclear test might follow. Indeed, as a tension-building exercise, a test of a uranium device is likely to work well (less so if the device will use plutonium). Such a test will clearly demonstrate that North Koreans have managed to produce a significant amount of highly enriched uranium. This will increase the dangers of proliferation because a uranium program is much more difficult

⁵ Foreign Ministry Spokesman Denounces US Military Attack on Libya // KCNA, 22 March 2011. www.kcna.co.jp accessed March 5, 2012

to monitor than the production of weapons-grade plutonium. Since a uranium program constitutes a major proliferation challenge, an unequivocal demonstration of North Korea's productive capacity might have a decisive impact on the US position, prompting the US to make concessions.

The domestic dilemma: To Reform? Or Not to Reform?

Every noticeable change in North Korea's political landscape is bound to produce media (but also academic) speculations about reforms in the North which are allegedly bound to happen in the North in near future or perhaps, 'just began' there⁶. Since the late 1980s it has been commonly assumed that the North Korean leaders should eventually come to their senses and emulate the Chinese model. So far, the North Korean government has stubbornly refused to follow this seemingly attractive strategy. Interestingly, the North Korean authorities have never made a secret of their outright rejection of the much lauded Chinese reform model. But denouncing the Chinese model on a regular basis – a common feature of the North Korean propaganda and press – has failed to have any impact on expect observers, many of whom are still anticipating reform now as they have been for two decades now.

The stubborn rejection of this seemingly attractive option is often described as "paranoid" and explained away by the alleged ideological zeal and/or stubbornness of the North Korean decision makers. Unfortunately, such observations seriously underestimate the North Korean leadership

⁶ As a good – but typical – example of over-optimistic (albeit slightly cautious) assessment of the 2002 'economy measurement improvement measures', see:

Young Chung, "North Korean Reform and Opening: Dual Strategy and 'Silli (Practical) Socialism'," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.77, No.2 (Summer 2004), pp. 283-304.

which is both rational and logical in their outlook. Rather, from the North Korean perspective, emulating the Chinese would be risky, not to say suicidal.

As already stated, the primary reason behind the North reluctance to accept the reform path is the staggering economic and income gap between North and South. Reform will bring in social relaxation and a dramatic increase in the accessibility of the information about the outside world. The spread of information, unavoidable if Chinese-style reforms are instituted, will be destabilizing for the North.

China faces no such threat. No doubt, the Chinese populace is well aware about the prosperity of the United States, Europe and Japan. But the latter three nations are foreign nations, which cannot directly be construed as proof of the illegitimacy of the state's claim to nationhood. China cannot (and would not want to) become the 51st state in the United States, or become a Japanese prefecture. The Chinese have no country to unify with to substantially improve their living standards (Taiwan is far too small to make any difference). The Korean situation is very different. A powerful pro-unification movement is likely to arise in the North with reform, and the emergence of such movement is likely to threaten power or, perhaps, even life of the North Korean decision makers.

This above reconstruction of Pyongyang elite's thinking is necessarily hypothetical, but a reliable confirmation of this hypothesis has emerged recently. In January 2011, journalists of Japanese 'Tokyo Shimbun' daily managed to interview Kim Jong Nam (Kim Chŏng-nam), Kim Jong Il's oldest son who lives overseas in semi-exile (largely in Macao and continental China), and is the only member of the Kim family who occasionally talk to the foreign journalists. His remarks became more frank in recent years, and in January 2011 he described the predicament of his father's regime in no uncertain terms. He was quoted as saying: "I personally think that reforms and openness are the best way to make live of the North Korean people more affluent. But if one takes into account the peculiarities of North Korea, one might fear that reforms and

openness will bring about system collapse.⁷” A remarkably frank – but completely reasonable – admission

There is little doubt that the current North Korean leadership understands the great dangers which are associated with attempted reforms. After all, Chang Song Taek and his peers have greatly contributed towards the anti-reformist hardline policy line of Kim Jong Il times.

Therefore, as long as actual political power in North Korea remains in the hands of the current ‘council of regency’, the chances of dramatic changes in domestic policy are slim.

However, one would expect that in due time Kim Jong Un will become an actual player in North Korean politics. His period of apprenticeship may last for several years, but sooner or later it will be over. Some people with first-hand knowledge of Kim Jong Un’s personality have privately described him to the present author as “ambitious and energetic”. Whether these accounts are accurate or not remains to be seen, but it appears to be unlikely that Kim Jong Un will be content to remain a figurehead for decades to come.

It seems that changes are also likely to be hastened by biology. All leading advisors of Kim Jong Un are old: currently they are in their mid- to late 60s or even 70s, so it appears improbable that their bodies and brains will function indefinitely. They are likely to be soon replaced by much younger people, many of whom will be Kim Jong Un’s peers – that is, people in their late 20s and early 30s now, obscenely young by the standards of North Korea’s gerontocracy. Taking into account the near hereditary nature of the North Korea’s social and political system, many of these people (if not all of them) will be grandchildren of the present-day top officials, but this does not mean they will share the same assumptions as their grandparents.

Many of these future leaders have studied overseas and nearly all of them are admirers of Western popular culture. This does not necessarily mean that they have a western worldview, but

⁷ Tokyo Shimbun, 2 February 2011.

it seems unlikely that any of them take the communist ideology – or, for that matter, the Juche ideology – seriously, even though many of them might be quite serious about a North Korean version of ethnic nationalism. Most of these people have been born into power and privilege, so they might lack the caution and sense of insecurity which is ingrained in the psyche of the current elite – lucky and cunning survivors of the bloody purges and cutthroat factional struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. In other words, the next generation may try to undertake Chinese-style reforms, and in this undertaking they might be supported and encouraged by Kim Jong Un himself. These youngsters may lack the understanding of how dangerous such reforms will be for the existing system, so they might see Chinese-style policies as the logical way to revive the moribund Northern economy.

Of course this is only one of many possibilities, and the present author is more inclined to believe that the next generation will choose *not* to follow the Chinese path, since Chinese-style reforms are likely to bring about the demise of the regime.

Glacial Change from below

Even though the North Korean leadership is extremely cautious about reforms and will probably never dare to tamper with the existing economic and political system, North Korean society is nonetheless slowly changing from below. These changes are clearly not to the liking of the state, but all attempts to stop this steady transformation have failed so far – and are likely to continue to fail in the future.

The Kim Il Sung era economic system, the near perfect embodiment of Stalinist, centrally-planned economies, collapsed in the early 1990s. Some parts of this system have survived, like the military-industry complex, some related infrastructure, and some export-related industries largely catering to the Chinese market. But production in most North Korean factories has come

to a near complete standstill. There is some disagreement over the exact scale of North Korean industrial output, but it is universally accepted that it is well below the 1990 level.⁸

When a majority of the North Korean populace suddenly lost access to government-issued food rations a major famine ensued. However by the late 1990s, survivors essentially rediscovered the market economy.

Nowadays, a majority of North Koreans make the bulk of their living outside the barely functioning state economy. They are engaged in private market activities, technically illegal but practically tolerated. North Koreans toil in private fields, they manufacture consumption goods in their homes or even at passively tolerated private workshops. They provide a many kinds of services (the revived and booming restaurant industry is overwhelmingly private), they trade and they smuggle. It was recently estimated that in 1998-2008 the share of income from informal economic activities reached 78% the total income of North Korean households.⁹

The growth of private enterprise has had numerous political and social consequences for North Korean society. It has led to a dramatic increase in official corruption, hitherto near absent. Low level officials are nearly always willing to turn a blind eye to technically illegal activities if they get kickbacks in return from private entrepreneurs. In some cases, they are also willing to overlook irregularities of a political nature. People can buy their way out of trouble if they are

⁸ In recent years, the transformation of North Korea's economy and society attracted much attention. Of English language book-length publications, one should mention, first of all: Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to transformation: refugee insights into North Korea* (Washington, DC : Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011).

⁹ Kim Byung-Yeon and Song Dongho, "The Participation of North Korean Households in the Informal Economy: Size, Determinants, and Effect," *Seoul Journal of Economics*, Vol. 21 No. 2 (July 2008), p.373.

caught watching South Korean videos or listening to foreign broadcasts (and the money involved is not prohibitively high).

Control over domestic travel, once notoriously strict, has all but disappeared (except for entry into Pyongyang itself) and the Sino-Korean border has become very porous. This has resulted in proliferation of rumours about the outside world. Another important phenomenon is the spread of South Korean and Chinese TV shows via video and DVD. A study by the InterMedia research group concluded that in 2009 the penetration rate was 21% and 5% for VCD and DVD players, respectively,¹⁰ and from my research it seems that in the borderland areas of the country some 70-80% of all households were in possession of DVD players by early 2012.

All this means a slow, but unstoppable disintegration of the two main pillars of North Korean society – information exclusion and all-encompassing surveillance. The younger North Koreans know, or at least suspect, that South Korea is doing far better than the North, even though they are likely to underestimate the yawning size of this gap. They are less afraid of the authorities and they are often involved with some networks of horizontal connections – for decades, the North Korean state has done everything it could to prevent the emergence of such connections. They have also grown up in a society where income largely comes from one's own good fortune, efforts and guile, and not from one's ability to ingratiate oneself with the state bureaucracy and faithfully parrot their official propaganda. For many of them, the state and its bureaucrats are not natural providers but rather a swarm of parasites which have to be tolerated as a fact of life, but whose necessity is doubtful at best.

The government perfectly understands that this spontaneous growth of market forces constitutes a long-term threat to the regime stability. There have been periods when market activities have been tolerated and even accepted – the culmination of such a period was the so-called 'July

¹⁰InterMedia, "International Broadcasting in North Korea: North Korean Refugee/Traveler Survey Report," April–August 2009.

1st reform measures” of 2002 – a much overrated but still significant attempt at adjusting the economic management to the new reality. There were also times, when state has tried its utmost to push the genie back in the bottle – like, say, throughout 2005-09 period. This attitude has led to a number of bans on an assortment of market activities and culminated in the failed currency reform of 2009.¹¹ In this struggle against market forces, the state has scored only very limited success. In most cases, bans were only enforced for a short period of time and then were completely forgotten by police and populace. Telling, most of these bans were lifted (covertly) after the failed currency 2009 – the state ordered that markets be left alone in the spring of 2010.

From the point of view of Pyongyang, it makes sense to control and contain the growth of the markets and private economic activities. However, the state has no ready substitute for them, since the old centrally-planned economy cannot be restarted in spite of efforts. Therefore, the domestic policies of Kim Jong Un’s government will probably continue to oscillate between attempts to push markets back or obliterate them completely and efforts to find some way to coexist with markets which now provide most North Koreans with their daily bread (or rather daily corn).

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So, what should we expect from the new leader in Pyongyang? In the short run, it will, probably, be more of the same: diplomatic maneuvers aimed at extracting foreign aid, stubborn unwillingness to initiate domestic reforms and, of course, unwavering commitment to keeping and, if necessary, advancing the nuclear weapons program. All these policies might be annoying

¹¹ For a detailed review of counter-reforms which preceded the 2009 currency reform fiasco, see: Andrei Lankov, “Pyongyang Strikes Back: North Korean Policies of 2002-08 and Attempts to Reverse “De-Stalinization from Below”,” *Asia Policy* 8, 2009.

and even dangerous to the outside world, but from the point of view of North Korea leaders, such things make perfect sense, so one should not expect them to reverse these policies.

In the long run, however, the emergence of Kim Jong Un might indeed have far-reaching consequences. He has been unable to build up a legitimacy which would equal that of his father, and he might be open to some reformist ideas – especially once his current advisers will be gone. So, one cannot rule out that eventually the new leaders will try some reform – perhaps, with destabilizing consequences.

And, irrespectively of the leaders' subjective intentions, the system is changing from below. The growth of market forces and spread of uncensored information from overseas is gradually corrupting and undermining the current system. Therefore, sooner or later the system is likely to collapse under its own weight – largely because of its ingrained and incurable inability to bring about living standards commensurate with its neighbors, above all, South Korea. Nonetheless, we should not expect this collapse to happen too soon, even though when it finally comes it will come out of the blue.