

Background and Outlook for the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly

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On May 18th, North Korea's Korean Central News Agency reported "The Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly on the 17th announced their decision to convene a session of the Supreme People's Assembly. According to their decision, the 3rd session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly will convene in Pyongyang on June 7th. "The SPA ordinarily should convene twice a year, in April and September, but since 1998 it has only been meeting once a year, with the exception of 2003. Holding a 3rd session only 2 months after the 2nd session, which occurred on April 9th, is highly irregular. It is believed that they must have significant reasons for doing so.

First, Chairman Kim Jong Il needs to report to the SPA about the results of his recent trip to China (May 3-7) and obtain approval for follow-up measures. On his way to Beijing, Chairman Kim toured the Chinese free development zones of Dalian and Tianjin, and development issues came up in his talks with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao as well. The North Korean authorities must feel a need to adopt follow-up measures in order to show off their cooperation with China.

Second, following the announcement that North Korea was to blame for the *Cheonan* incident, they will want to express their position in response to the strained North-South relationship and international pressures. South Korea has said that the *Cheonan* incident was caused by North Korea, and as punishment it is freezing all aspects of North-South interaction and pursuing international sanctions in cooperation with the US. In response, North Korea will want to declare its firm position, chastising South Korea through "the people's righteous indignation," and saying it will endure any sacrifice.

Third, they need to perform additional personnel reshuffling in the wake of National Defense Commission member Kim Il Cheol's retirement, which North Korea said was purely due to his advanced age. Actually, NDC First Vice-Chairman Cho Myong Rok is also unable to perform his duties in practice. At this time, Chairman Kim Jong Il must feel the need to reaffirm the status of the

NDC for his successor Kim Jong Un.

Considering the above reasons together, we can anticipate that the 3rd session of the 12th SPA will likely adopt the following measures.

First, it is possible that they will announce additional free trade zones. Historically North Korea tends to announce new reform policies every 8-9 years. For example there were the reforms adopted in early 1970, the joint ventures law in 1983, the establishment of the Rajin-Sonbong special zone in 1991, and the “7.1 Economic Management Measures” and the announcement on the Shinuiju special zone in 2002. A special feature of North Korean reform is that they tend to choose times when the external environment is particularly troubled. This appears to be their strategy to mitigate external pressure and maintain their system, by assuming a pacifying attitude towards the outside while maintaining firm internal control. Thus it is possible that this time they may announce new economic zones in Shinuiju, Wonsan, or Nampo.

Second, they may adopt a “dual posture” towards South Korea. While leaving no doubts that they strongly deny the claims of North Korean involvement in the *Cheonan* incident, they may propose a “Joint Conference of Representatives of Political Parties and Social Organizations of North and South Korea” to perform a “joint North-South investigation.” Following the press conference on the circumstances of the Cheonan incident, inter-Korean relations are obviously strained, and North Korea can be expected to react strongly. North Korea will likely declare that, in the event of a South Korean military attack, it will “retaliate a thousand-fold.”

Third, due to the tension of the current regional environment North Korea may move for an early implementation of the succession system. For this purpose, they will need to strengthen the National Defense Commission organization, while refilling Kim Il Cheol’s vacant seat and possibly assigning a new rank for the intended successor, Kim Jong Un. The younger Kim is already amassing a record of service in the NDC, and in consideration of Kim Jong Il’s health and relations with China, they may at this time establish a “Kim Jong Un Leadership System.” Accordingly, they may have to make sweeping personnel changes, affecting the military, the cabinet, and the party. In this event, individuals with a higher level of expertise may gain influence.

