

Political Tasks for the 3rd KWP Delegates' Conference

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On June 2nd, 2010, North Korea held the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly - a highly irregular second session within a year. At that session, Jang Sung Taek was promoted to Vice-Chair of the National Defense Commission (NDC). Then on June 26th North Korea announced, via the Politburo, that a Party Delegates' Conference will be held in early September.

What is the point of re-advancing the KWP to the front and rearranging the top body? Examining various political factors, we can cautiously construct a few theories. The most basic goal is to deal with the issues of weakened governmental powers due to Kim Jong Il's worsening health and the advancement of a succession plan by inaugurating a new political power structure and securing its political and ideological validity.

There are two options for achieving the goal. The first is a minimalist option. The elderly high officials, already in the Defense Commission, would acquire one more title serving in the newly reorganized highest ruling organs of the party, particularly the Politburo, and assign Kim Jong Eun a membership in the Politburo or to head the Organization and Guidance Department at the central party. However, the central organs of the Party will likely remain stuck in a politically minor role. In that case the Delegates' Conference will have no special significance other than as a ceremonial proclamation of Kim Jong Eun's promotion.

The second is a more ambitious one of power restructuring. The Party may be restored once again to a powerful central role. This would provide a counterweight to the forces and interests represented by the NDC. If this happens, the two competing organs of the NDC and the KWP will form a system of checks and balances, of competition and mutual surveillance. This has 3 chief benefits for Kim Jong Il.

First, he secures his authority and security as the ultimate arbiter between the NDC and the Party apparatus. In the latter periods of the regimes of Stalin and Mao, they set up similar triangular systems of balances to promote the designated successor, while protecting the incumbent by way of the third. It

is dangerous for a dictator to depend too heavily on any one side, so he needs to secure his position by making two subordinate powers offset each other.

Second, Kim Jong Il can reduce his own workload considerably. In this way, he is changing his operational model. In the past Kim Jong Il employed an extremely concentrated decision-making process in which he personally took charge of each operation down to the minutiae. Now he is restoring the central party apparatus and giving it a measure of authority, while formally transferring some powers and establishing a formal division of labor among the various Party organs. This is a much safer move for Kim Jong Il than secretly appointing Jang Sung Taek as a sort of proxy. Kim will involve himself only in the most important decisions. Just as Kim Il Sung did after choosing him as successor in 1974, now Kim Jong Il is stepping back from the front lines and moving to a higher position of esteem as “revered leader.” The start of work on his own bronze statue is further evidence of this.

Third, it allows him to expand the scope of Kim Jong Eun’s power base. By restoring the Party apparatus, he expands the space in which Kim Jong Eun can build his own independent power base, without irritating other powerful persons and institutions. Particularly since the start of the *songun* era, the central party has been significantly weakened and maintenance of the Party apparatus has grown careless. Because of this, the Party structures will have to undergo wide-scale remodeling, and many empty positions will need to be refilled, including those of Central Committee members.

Attempting a more direct reshuffling of power could lead to internal turmoil. If Kim Jong Il were to construct a new nucleus of power under his own supervision, then someone else would have to be relegated to a weaker position and perhaps even purged. There is a precedent for this. In the early 1990s when military domination began in earnest, Kim Jong Il made a series of purges: first the 1993 purge of the Soviet-educated officer group, then the 1995 purge of persons connected to the 6th Army Corps. After the *songun* policy was begun in 1995, the NDC grew in power while the authority and functions of the KWP Central Committee were reduced. In the late 1990s there was a purge of central and regional Party officials including several Party Secretaries (the Shimhwajo Incident). In 2005, as the central party and Public Security forces began to regain some strength, there was a purge and weakening of the Cabinet.

In the future we should watch for two major elements regarding the power reorganization. First is the issue of the military, at present the major representative of established interests. Since 1995 the military has been free from purges, and under the *songun* policy they have expanded while endeavoring to secure their own interests. They are not likely to passively accept infringements on their vested rights. Second is the long-delayed generational power shift. There is a gap of nearly 2 generations between the current elderly leadership and successor Kim Jong Eun, and there are vast disparities in the dispositions and tendencies of both. Here Kim Jong Eun’s faction faces a dilemma: for his generation to emerge in the nucleus of power, many powerful entities will have to be eliminated alternatively, seeking the favor



of older generation in the higher ranks could be detrimental to Kim Jong Eun’s authority. Kim Jong Eun will need a strong supporter who can bridge the gap between his generation and that of his father (and grandfather).

From the perspective of those planning and executing the Party Delegates’ Conference, the central issue is how to manage resistance from the military. The military is a double obstacle. Represented by the NDC, it is both entitled and elderly. It has maintained strength and vested rights supported by the power of its organizational magnitude and the external security tension, and it will be resistant to change. If the military can effectively defend its own vested rights, then even if this Party Delegates’ Conference creates a new leadership structure it will not be able to invest it with any power.

If military resistance can be controlled, the Party Delegates’ Conference will be a significant step in executing the generational transition and establishing a new nucleus of power. This will mean that they can officially initiate the plan for establishing a successor to Kim Jong Il. Military representatives will be represented in the Politburo, but the majority is made up of civilians from the Party and Cabinet. It is quite possible that Jang Sung Taek will participate in both the NDC and the Politburo. He may be charged with acting as the bridge between the NDC and the Politburo, as well as between the elder and younger generations. The Politburo will be composed mainly of elderly officials of the Party and Cabinet, but now the younger generation will probably begin to participate. The KWP Central Committee will be reconstituted around the younger generation. It will probably be built around a nucleus of members from the post-war generation (50s) and the Kim Jong Eun generation (in their 20s and 30s). Some younger representatives of the military will also be included. This is to keep the military stabilized while undergoing generational and factional transitions. Overall, the new Party Central Committee signifies the departure of the generation preceding Kim Jong Il (aged 68) to make way for new faces in the upper and middle leadership.

If a new power nucleus is to be created, it must have some kind of justification and a pivotal focus. At the very least, it must be given the façade of a new policy and ideology. Also they may need to change the overall social atmosphere and agenda, just as the *songun* ideology was created when the *songun* system of government was being established. As “the party center” in 2010 replaced “the core of the revolution” since 1996 as the focal point of regime of loyalty, it will need a different rationale.

The new policy is likely to focus on prioritizing the economy. As a strong military power endowed with nuclear weapons (and a military power which boasts of its ability to deal a fatal blow at any moment to South Korea), they will argue that North Korea now ought to shift focus to the economy. This argument has already been put forth intermittently since the 1st nuclear test in 2006. It emerged again in the 2010 New Years’ Joint Editorial and in Kim Jong Il’s “Beef Soup with Rice” promise. The successor and the new leadership group need to promise to improve the peoples’ livelihoods in order to gain public trust. It is hardly certain whether the conservative economic policies will be altered in the near future, but in



the long-term, after the new leadership group has consolidated its power, they may feel safe to pursue a market oriented economic policy, which would guarantee their privileges. Doing otherwise would not only make it impossible to resolve the economic problems, it would also go against the tendency of the new generation which emphasizes practicality.

The likely core of the new ideology will be the proclamation of a new generation, a new era, a bright future, and great changes. A poster that went up in front of the No. 1 Department Store in Pyongyang last March was seen as a harbinger of things to come. Cha Tae Woon, “Symbols of Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang: Start of Propaganda?” Yonhap News, March 14th, 2010 The poster shows a backdrop of a scene from the April 2009 “Chukpo Yahoe”(evening fireworks party) and a long-range missile, with the words “CNC” (Computer Numerical Controller) and “Marching to the World” in large letters in the foreground. So as the KWP comes to the fore, the populist slogan “The Party works for the people” will gain emphasis. This reflects the growing distance between the Party and the “people,” and the former’s increasing concern over the sentiment of the latter.

The North Korean authorities will seek to reinforce the Party structures, co-opt the younger generation in order to restore the fidelity of the substratum of officials, and expand their domination over all layers of society. However due to the changed environment, the middle and lower Party structures and organizations will have to be altered. It remains to be seen whether revitalizing the Party organization will lead to restoring its organizational and ideological work at job and residential places, as it has in the past. To reinforce reform and normalization of the Party organization, the authorities may also raise the specter of some sort of struggle against “anti-socialist phenomena,” and accordingly undertake some political purges of “corrupt” party officials and bureaucrats.

At any rate, the aforementioned policies will have a greater probability of success if the external security environment changes. However, their external strategy is not likely to change in the near future. Their goal is to reproduce the situation that followed the first nuclear test. North Korea will seek to establish its possession of nuclear weapons as a fait accompli while entering into a bilateral negotiating relationship with the US and securing aid from South Korea. But if they adhere too rigidly to this position, in the longer-term the new leadership may encounter serious domestic difficulties due to their intensified isolation and worsening economic problems. In the long-term, the new leadership may ultimately seek compromise. They will be more likely to feel that way if a deal is promoted under the premise that complete denuclearization will take some time, and if appropriate compensation is offered.

Finally, it is possible that the North Koreans themselves have not decided yet what actions they will take at this Party Delegates’ Conference. In the future their plans could change or they might make some sort of compromise. This is because the major factions are divided at present as to what should be done. However, the faction behind the drive to hold a Party Delegates’ Conference has at least succeeded in



announcing the conference plans. This faction’s ultimate goal is to take this opportunity to enact a major reorganization of the power structure. However, many factors indicate that achieving this goal will not be easy.

