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North Korea under Kim Jong Il

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Introduction

Kim Jong Il became the supreme leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) upon the death of his father, Kim Il Sung, in July 1994, and ruled for seventeen years until he died on 17 December 2011 at the age of seventy. While the influence of Kim Il Sung in shaping the DPRK is self-evident, the role played by the younger Kim remains more obscure. In what ways, then, was the DPRK in 2011 different from the DPRK in 1994, how might we usefully assess these differences, and what role did Kim Jong Il play in bringing them about?

Current assessments of Kim Jong Il are deeply coloured by a number of factors, ranging from the trivialities of media imagery to the profoundly serious dimensions of both the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program and its human rights record. The non-Korean media has been especially influential in shaping perceptions, such that upon his death, the outside world wasted little time in passing harsh judgement on Kim, generally acknowledging his skilful manoeuvring toward despised ends, but mainly highlighting his admittedly singular private life and habits, liberally bestowing upon him the epithets of ‘tyrant’ and ‘despot’, and also highlighting what were presented as the consequence of all this folly – an impoverished, starving, isolated, brutalised, failing state. And yet, now we are well into the reign of his son and chosen successor, Kim Jong Un, and the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and payload delivery programs are continuing to make steady progress, seemingly impervious to outside pressure, while the long-predicted collapse of the economy has not occurred. Nor has the recurrence of famine-like conditions, although the food situation remains serious.

Given Pyongyang’s basic goals of survival and control of its destiny, such achievements present as indices of success – paradoxical though this may seem to many. The regime that Kim Jong Il has bequeathed to his son still believes it is able to pursue its quixotic chosen destiny, albeit with what looks like substantially reduced effectiveness in some areas, and while this state of affairs is of course subject to abrupt and unforeseen change, most commentators continue to base predictions of such change – if not the outright demise of the DPRK state – on extrapolations which often seem little removed from hunches. This present outcome clearly warrants a much more careful assessment of Kim Jong Il than many currently seem prepared to offer.
What were Kim Jong Il’s goals? Given the opaque nature of formal government rhetoric, and the clearly self-serving, subtly dissembling content of Kim’s recorded conversations with outsiders, we are very much reliant on both historical perspective and on the accumulated pattern of state behaviour over time. We are certainly safe, though, in accepting the dominant regime slogan ‘Let’s live in our own way’ as a core goal, to be defended on the level of, say, ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. For those in the DPRK who still either count themselves as true believers, or else feel they have no other option, this remains the polestar. The definition of ‘our own way’, means, of course, the ‘own way’ determined by the Kimist elite with next to no input from outside. It used to mean active mobilisation of the entire resources of the state to achieve Korean reunification on the North’s terms, but it has increasingly come to mean survival of the way of life they have ended up with, and control of their own destiny in order to keep it that way. Rhetoric on the theme of creating a strong, modern state abounds, but the goal of building a modern socialist Korean state has faded into the past.

To what issues, then, should we look in order to assess Kim Jong Il’s leadership? Under Kim the country made substantial progress toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons, it suffered serious and endemic food shortages, including the catastrophic 1994–96 Arduous March famine, and it accepted significant private market activities as part of its consumer economy. These constituted what we might term Kim’s ‘three crises’, and an assessment of his handling of them, based on current outcomes, will obviously tell us much about his effectiveness as a leader.1

Background

At the outset, it is important to remind ourselves of some key aspects of Kim Jong Il’s background, route to power and personality. His formative influences were not nearly as dramatic as his father’s, who moulded the DPRK in accordance with a diverse array of early experiences, including exposure to Japanese militarism, a decade of guerrilla warfare, and training as part of the Soviet Red Army during World War Two. By contrast, the younger Kim, who was born in the Soviet Union in 1941 and was eight years old at the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, grew to maturity during what were tumultuous years for the Workers’ Party of Korea, but as a princeling he was cocooned from such events. After graduating from Kim Il Sung University in 1964, at age 22 he entered the Party organisation – by now thoroughly dominated by his father – where for the next thirty years, his major field of activity was agitprop, with a focus on the subordination of art and culture to Kimist ideology.2 In this capacity he secured his position as his father’s successor, further strengthening the foundations of Kimist rule through Maoist-like mass mobilization campaigns during the 1970s, most notably the Three Revolutions Team Movement, an insurgency movement whose activities further hobbled a faltering economy and effectively completed the destruction of the Workers’ Party of Korea as a functioning collective. Kim then began assuming public positions commensurate with his behind-the-scenes power, first emerging at the apex of the Workers’ Party of Korea at the Sixth Party Conference in 1980. Election to the Supreme People’s Assembly followed in 1982, and he became Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army in 1992.

Kim Jong Il came to power as a genius-leader surrounded by the cult of personality established by his father and, of course, derived from Josef Stalin, the great avatar of this form of leadership. Observers have speculated to what extent Kim Jong Il ruled by terror, stealth, consultation or committee, but no convincing evidence exists to contradict the widely prevailing belief that he chose to rule with few internal political constraints in determining policy. From time to time, people take issue with what they perceive to be a misleading, monolithic perception of government in the DPRK, and posit the existence of factions and sectional interest
groups, ranging from ‘hard line’ to ‘moderate’, with Kim somehow required to balance interests and ‘tilt’ between these entities. However, this is just a posit, and a dubious one at that, because we lack hard evidence for the belief that policy formulation and execution is accompanied by any significant degree of internal policy debate, and even the high-level defector Hwang Jang Yop did not provide persuasive evidence to the contrary. High-ranking officials have occasionally been purged, but their transgressions appear to have been individual, taking place in the context of court politics, rather than as the result of substantive views they may have expressed on ideological or policy issues. Meanwhile when it came to making basic strategic decisions, whatever problems and constraints Kim Jong Il suffered in their aftermath, the evidence drawn from protracted observation of the DPRK’s political culture is that he faced few constraints; if he chose to consult, or even defer, then well and good, but he was under no pressure to do so, as his was a personal autocracy. As such, it was Kim’s leadership which shaped his country’s response to the various challenges it faced, not those challenges which shaped Kim’s leadership.

And what of Kim Jong II the man? The international media dined out for years on lurid accounts of his lifestyle – debauchery, sadism, prodigious alcohol consumption, gourmandism, jaw-dropping extravagance. These images were usually attached to political behaviour which favoured descriptions such as ‘brutal’, ‘ruthless’, ‘erratic’ or ‘capricious’, producing a total effect that prompted strings of seasoned foreign politicians, envoys and negotiators to feel obliged to register surprise when they encountered Kim’s evenness, his strong grasp of state affairs, detailed knowledge of the outside world and adroit negotiating skills. In her memoirs, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright noted that during her missile negotiations with Kim in 2000 he was ‘an intelligent man who knew what he wanted. He was isolated, not uniformed’ (2003: 467). The comment was amplified by one of her staff members, who found him ‘smart and a quick problem-solver . . . very different from the way he was known to the outside world . . . he knew a lot more than most leaders would – and he was a conceptual thinker’.3 Chris Patten, EU Commissioner for External Relations, remarked several months later, ‘He was very articulate, spoke without notes. The talks were surprisingly open and free-flowing.’4 ROK, Russian and Japanese officials have been quoted in a similar vein. This suggests, then, that Kim’s lifestyle is largely irrelevant in the broader scheme of things, since no credible observer has ever advanced the case that his private pursuits impacted on either his decision-making ability or the coherence of state policy.

A further revelation to Kim’s interlocutors was his often detailed knowledge of the world outside North Korea, albeit acquired second-hand and captive to an unusual world view. Somehow, people assumed that the quality of this knowledge implied a potential for engagement, but Kim’s record shows that he did not see anything in the international order that North Korea might wish to attach itself to. Like all leaders, in his home environment he naturally acquired his share of distortions and lacunae, his probably being severer than most, and these, combined with Kimist political tradition and inheritance caused him to draw rather different conclusions to those that many somehow expected of him, with the result that the DPRK remained in self-imposed isolation. Nevertheless, within the Kimist world view these conclusions were far from invalid: for Kim the greater the knowledge, the greater the threat perception, and the more he felt he had to fear as he pursued the basic set of policies he had inherited for the preservation of the Kimist state.

A further significant side to Kim Jong Il was his deep absorption in the performing arts North Korean style, especially cinema, and this is often cited by those assembling a comic or disparaging portrait of Kim. We could speculate that his obvious intelligence, his enclosed world, and his status as a princeling might have influenced him to build up a rich, extensive alternative universe

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in which he was in charge of more than what his father decided he would be in charge of, and that the resources available to him allowed him to indulge himself to a rather spectacular degree. Given the stifling pressures of life, first as a princeling and then as designated heir and successor, perhaps these pursuits were a judicious choice. And given the hallmarks and conventions of this genre, it is no wonder that he seems to have masterminded the production of an oeuvre of appalling, disturbing spectacles. But again, there are no grounds for assuming that these pursuits in some way indicated an unbalanced, eccentric or frivolous disposition.

In sum, then, as we turn from what Kim Jong Il was to what he did, we find that he was rigorously trained and initiated into a well-defined career path within a well-defined system, which, furthermore, he was profoundly accepting of. He appears to have approached business in a well-informed, self-disciplined, consistent manner, seeking to preserve as much as he could of the system he had played such a key role in shaping. Even the liberal resort to state terror and the scale of human rights abuse under his watch did not appear to issue from any streak of psychopathy, as was the case with Stalin. Rather, such callousness was part – sadly, an accepted, integral part – of the broader Kimist system.

The DPRK’s nuclear weapons program

The first issue in any examination of Kim Jong Il’s performance must, of course, be the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program. This is because it was not only the DPRK’s primary chosen means of state survival, but also the matter of greatest concern to the international community. The DPRK’s nuclear weapons program began in earnest toward the end of the 1970s as hopes of waging successful conventional warfare against the South faded. By the late 1980s it faced concerted international pressure to ratify its 1985 accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), sign a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agreement (IAEA) and submit to inspections. In the early 1990s, suspicions about DPRK intentions grew, culminating in a major standoff with the United States in July 1994, brought about by the DPRK’s unsanctioned removal of plutonium rods from its (Yongbyon) reactor.

By the early 1990s, the DPRK of course faced a heavily degraded strategic and economic situation. The end of the Cold War had deprived Pyongyang of the protection of its mutual defence treaty with the Soviet Union, and had greatly expanded the global possibilities of US military power and deployment. The demands of basic reunification strategy, domestic political mobilisation, and the singular Kimist world view had historically constituted powerful drivers for the direction of extraordinary levels of hostility and abuse toward the US, and we have no reason to doubt the DPRK’s sincerity in this. Thus, the DPRK’s US-centred threat perception, elevated at the best of times, became further pronounced in this, the worst of times. The equation was simple: poor and rapidly losing further economic ground, almost friendless with the partial exception of China, and with nothing but the anathematised option of systemic reform on the table, the achievement of a credible nuclear threat presented the best, and some would have argued the only, option for preserving the Kimist system.

Debate on the nature of this threat tends to begin at this point and focuses on whether the DPRK can or cannot be persuaded by the US and other adversaries to abandon its weapons program and embrace any alternative means of guaranteeing state survival. This can be a rather complex debate at times, beset in the first place by almost total ignorance of the true dimensions of the DPRK weapons program, and extremely limited perceptions of DPRK mindset, goals and strategy. This in turn fuels a rich debate on the tactics, strategies and goals of all parties, which is largely beyond our present scope. However, what may be said with confidence after
observing the record of the past twenty years is that Pyongyang has not lurched from crisis to crisis, tactic to tactic, but has followed a consistent strategy that links nuclear weapons capability to the very identity of the Kimist state.

In the process, the DPRK has carefully laid the groundwork for the successful pursuit of its chosen path by thinking through likely consequences. The first consequence was obviously the economic impact of pursuing a series of major, expensive, technologically advanced projects as rapidly as possible, and with minimal outside interference. Personnel needed to be trained, facilities created, sufficient amounts of plutonium needed to be produced and weaponized, and a means of delivery developed, and all of this would have to rest on a very fragile economic base. The result was the continuing absolute priority accorded to the country’s proportionally huge military economy, which meant that no serious attempt could be made to resurrect the collapsed non-military economy; somehow, figures convinced the leadership that the country could do this. A collateral consequence was that the DPRK quickly proceeded to utilize the threat potential of its program in order to extract economic resources from an anxious international community, but it makes no sense to regard this as a major objective of the program per se. One does not make commitments on this scale for such returns, nor, for that matter, for the purpose of some nebulous form of ‘leverage’ in negotiations, or indeed for any other merely tactical objective.

The second strategic consequence was that the DPRK would have to live in an almost permanent state of conflict with a wide range of international actors over this matter, and this would involve withstanding an array of pressures. Diplomatically, only minimal achievement towards weaponisation could be achieved before precipitating confrontation with the IAEA. Moreover, as soon as anything like the true dimensions of the progress the DPRK had achieved in its nuclear weapons program became open knowledge, the DPRK would invite a broad range of international sanctions and forfeit a great deal of leverage in other areas of negotiation, especially with the Republic of Korea (ROK). In short, the dividend for the Kimists of such doomsday weaponry was survival on their own terms, while the price was that they could go no further than limited, tactical engagement with the international community and had to accept forms of pressure such as sanctions along the way. Since the DPRK was already alienated from the international order, almost as an article of faith, this did not present as a major challenge, but it helps us to account for the DPRK’s unflinching set against reform, since it assessed any meaningful reform process as compromising their nuclear program and thus conceding leverage to outside forces.

The DPRK received an early dividend in November 1994 when the Yongbyon crisis was resolved through the Geneva Framework Agreement (GFA) with the US, and essentially it got to keep the unknown amount of plutonium it had already extracted and agreed to a dual track, whereby it would come back under the IAEA inspection regime in return for receiving major quantities of heavy fuel oil and two light-water nuclear reactors, ostensibly to compensate for lost power generation capacity. It is idle to spend time apportioning precise measures of blame for the rather predictable demise a decade later of a complex, flawed agreement, but the GFA did at least meet the short-term needs of the US, which had overreached itself, and the DPRK, which had bought time to carry forward its program. Disdainful of the economic advantages it had garnered as ends in themselves, Pyongyang no doubt valued the fact that the fuel assistance freed up resources elsewhere in the economy, while the reactors never proceeded beyond the initial construction phase.

By 1998, despite the surrounding economic chaos and human distress, the DPRK had also advanced its missile development program to the point where in August that year, it test-fired its first substantial missile. This prompted a flurry of diplomacy in the last months of the Clinton Administration which aimed at curtailing the DPRK’s missile exports, but which ultimately
failed to produce tangible results. Relations with the US then quickly deteriorated under the Bush Administration as deep and genuine concern over the DPRK’s nuclear program, abiding scepticism of the efficacy of any form of conciliatory negotiation such as the ROK’s Sunshine Policy6, and belief that the North was in fact a failing state. This, plus the bedrock of neo-conservative ideology, led the US into increasingly rigid stances, characterised by the use of extreme – and to the North Koreans insulting – public language, especially in referring to Kim Jong II, and culminating in the inclusion of the DPRK along with Iran and Iraq in the administration’s self-defined ‘axis of evil’ in Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2002.

In any case, by now the DPRK’s policy matrix was firmly set. They had avoided outright economic collapse and, despite international pressure, had secured adequate resources to continue the pursuit of its nuclear and missile programs. How far they had actually come was revealed in October 2002 when the DPRK effectively acknowledged to US negotiators that they had been pursuing a parallel, secret highly enriched uranium production program for some time. This finally terminated the life of the already-moribund GFA, and unleashed a further round of nuclear diplomacy, characterised by the fruitless cat-and-mouse Six Party Talks format, involving the US, the ROK, China, Japan, Russia and the DPRK. These talks tried to project a semblance of management of the situation during six rounds between 2003 and 2009 before being suspended.

Only Pyongyang knows if indeed it suffered any inhibition by agreeing to these talks, but meanwhile, the milestones passed swiftly by. In December 2002 it expelled the last IAEA inspectors, and in April 2003 it withdrew from the NPT. In February 2005 it officially announced that it had developed nuclear weapons; in July 2006 it test-fired a number of missiles into the Eastern Sea and then in October conducted its first low-yield underground nuclear test. Significant negotiations took place in the last months of the Bush Administration without result, and since then more bomb and missile tests have occurred.

The extent to which this pursuit has been determined by the behaviour of the DPRK’s adversaries and the extent to which it has been dictated by Kimist ideology constitute rather enduring polarities of interpretation, and is likely to continue to be the case. However, one does not need to reach any resolution of this debate in order to note the combination of tactical acumen and strategic focus and consistency demonstrated by the DPRK in pursuing this goal over a long period of time under enormous pressure. This should be taken into account in any assessment of Kim Jong II’s leadership, especially as he himself displayed a close command of the issues during the brief periods in which he was personally present during negotiations.

The famine

Progress in the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program was achieved against the background of a catastrophic famine, known in the DPRK as the period of the Arduous March, which claimed upwards of one million lives during 1994–96, roughly 5% of the population. Clear food supply distress signals had already emerged in 1993 while Kim Il Sung was still in charge. The older Kim’s mistrust of the agricultural sector and his ideologically rigid policy of subjecting it to industrial norms of production had entrenched inefficiency and under-performance for many years, but now as inputs collapsed in the broader economy – ranging from maintenance and spare parts to fuel and fertilizer supply – flood conditions in August 1994 – which were serious, but not biblical – caused tragedy.

The enormous loss of life had as much to do with the DPRK’s policies as with the availability or non-availability of food. The problems began with a highly centralised, inefficient decision-making structure and with lines of communication which were rigorously ordered on top-down
principles, with the reverse flow almost totally reserved for conveying military-security information or else concealing unfavourable developments from the leadership. In a manner that recalls the crisis management performance of the Soviet leadership in the face of the Chernobyl disaster, having operated for decades without the need to seriously consider the claims of a civil society, and essentially viewing the entire population as a military asset, the DPRK authorities were simply not tooled, conceptually as much as systemically, to gather, process, and react to data on disasters or emergencies. This meant in turn that international donors were themselves unable to respond quickly, and this further compounded the disaster.

In addition, a major bottleneck existed in the form of the Public Distribution System (PDS). Modelled on the delivery of rations to a field army, this long-standing food rationing mechanism was the means by which government controlled who got what and how much. This was a cornerstone state policy and practice, not to mention an arbiter of life or death for the general population, and the government could not countenance people going outside it. Food was to come to the people, and due to rigid internal controls on human movement, the people could not go to the food. Thus when nothing came to them, people died in huge numbers where they lived – especially in the major industrial cities of the northeast such as Hamhung and Chongjin (Demick 2009). All the while, in fact, there was a considerable amount of food in the country, and the expansion of commercial imports, which as recently as 1993 had exceeded one million tonnes, was also an option. However, domestic stocks were chiefly in the form of stockpiles reserved in case of military action, or else earmarked for the Pyongyang-based elite, and hence were sacrosanct, while only a modest increase in the level of foreign purchases took place during 1994–95.

As the famine took hold, and as foreign humanitarian workers were allowed into the country, many were surprised, if not confounded, by the behaviour of the DPRK authorities. They encountered a pattern of obstructive behaviour, involving rigorous efforts to isolate aid workers from the populace, denial of access to many of the most-affected areas, and the diversion of food aid away from the most needy, all of which spoke of reactions governed by self-interest and heightened threat perception, but certainly not humanitarian impulse (Haggard & Noland 2005). Essentially, amid the understandable confusion, what they were encountering was an emerging policy comprising three major elements. First, Party–Army demands would consistently be given priority over the most at-risk groups who were the primary targets of the food aid. Second, the DPRK would not attempt any meaningful reform of now-dysfunctional Kimist agricultural policies. To do so might, of course, invite questioning of the content the widely circulated ‘infallible’ pronouncements of Kim Il Sung on this topic, with the danger that this might spread to other policy areas. This option therefore remained anathema – a typical example of the way in which the Eternal President of the Republic continued to rule the country from his mausoleum.

However this was not an entirely illogical stance, because the option of both more or less meeting food requirements from international donors and maintaining ideological sanctity – that is, conditions of minimum disturbance to the existing system – was available, and this constituted the third element in the DPRK’s food strategy: international food aid would be allowed to become a fixture in the DPRK economy, though of course it would be tightly controlled to prevent the concession of any leverage. Once the food aid began to flow, commercial food imports were minimised as the government, long schooled in external predatory behaviour, essentially identified the economic dividend in using international aid to subsidise other priorities. Food aid sources also fluctuated with a pronounced linkage to the political calculations of both donor and recipient. In general, the DPRK benefited from this process, and as levels of food aid from initial large-scale donors such the US and the EU levelled off,
and even fell post-2000, this slack was taken up by China and, during 2001–2008, the ROK. With their non-intrusive, undemanding ways, these two were in fact more desirable partners, and had the effect of increasing DPRK leverage against the monitoring requirements of the World Food Program and others (Haggard & Noland 2007:7).

What, then, is the present outcome of all this? The DPRK’s actions, strategies and their outcomes should leave no one in any doubt as to its determination and effectiveness, nor should it surprise that in applying triage measures, Kim chose to sacrifice the lives of so many people in order to defend the pursuit of broader objectives, for this is consistent with the core values of the regime. Meaningful agricultural reform has not occurred, and food production levels still approximate the levels of the early 1990s. Famine conditions have not yet recurred, though further significant deaths occurred in 2008 after a bad harvest in 2007, and vulnerability levels remain high. However, with some twenty years of experience in food aid politics now behind it, the DPRK has good reason to believe that it will be able to get by without significant compromise to its system. Thus, while Kim Jong Il did not direct a timely response to the famine, nor did he preside over any real amelioration of the food supply situation, these were not objectives in themselves. In the desperate calculus of the time, and within the constraints of the Kimist system, he achieved the more important objective of containing the threat potential of this situation.

Market economics

If there is one area where the DPRK of today looks and feels different from the DPRK of 1994, it is in the growth of an officially-tolerated private consumer market sector. Government-administered marketplaces now operate in many localities, and a broad range of legal, semi-legal and illegal economic activity proceeds, frequently involving official resources, and accompanied by escalating levels of bribery and corruption. This is mostly a Pyongyang phenomenon, of course, and from the changing, neon-sign-dotted skyline of the capital come rich anecdotes of the scale and variety of small (and some not-so-small) businesses, the ubiquity of mobile phones, growing volumes of vehicular traffic and the like. Such anecdotes will have to speak for themselves amid the on-going statistical blackout, but while they testify to the scale of Chinese involvement in the DPRK consumer economy, more importantly they reflect nearly twenty years of private enterprise activity.

This phenomenon has its origins in the Arduous March famine, where the clear message of the leadership to both state-owned enterprises and ordinary citizens became ‘Fend for yourselves – we’ll be back’. In this process it permitted the previously impermissible – namely, a role for autonomous economic activity by state-owned enterprises, and a role for citizens in informal, grey and black market activities. This development marked the beginning of a significant shift in the structure of some sectors in the DPRK economy, beginning at the tactical level, but gradually expanding as the inability of the government to organize any alternative inputs became clear. In fact, the cart began to lead the horse as the authorities discovered they could extract new dividends from these new forms of economic activity, for they greatly expanded the opportunities for rent-seeking, such as the extracting of bribes and pay-offs in connection with a wide range of technically illegal activities, not to mention outright confiscatory behaviour.

After deaths peaked and began to subside in 1997, the leadership became convinced that the worst of the famine was over and the process of reasserting control began, first through propaganda campaigns and then through policy measures. The government had been forced to live with a situation in which most of the population had slipped outside the PDS net, with defector surveys...
suggesting many people earned upwards of 80% of their income from private sources during the period 1998–2003 (Lankov 2009: 53), and this posed a potential threat to their authority. The genie was out of the bottle, and henceforth, success in meeting this ideological and political challenge would be measured in terms of how far the regime could go in restoring the status quo ante.

As with the handling of negotiations with the US and the ROK during this period, the DPRK authorities met this initial challenge with tactical flexibility, but with no hint of strategic uncertainty. The first major step toward management and control of market activities was taken with the self-described 7.1 Measures for the Improvement of Economic Management announced on 1 July 2002. Since a total reversion to the system that existed before the famine, however ideologically attractive, appeared to be beyond the government’s means at this point, after seven years of monitoring the practices that had sprung up, the government now sought to define what it could live with for the moment. In the first place, it could definitely live with the greater autonomy now exercised by state-owned enterprises, for those which had survived had demonstrated some flair in raising foreign currency through a variety of means, some of them legal, and their remittances were useful. Secondly, it could extend some measure of acceptance and recognition to private markets as this enabled greater control. These markets now became more substantial, regulated and permanent (Lankov & Kim 2008; Everard 2011). Thirdly, with the demise of the PDS system, cash transactions for daily necessities had expanded, and since the government still lacked the means of re-introducing this system, it brought official currency and prices – which historically had been set at highly artificial levels – more into line with actual traded values, which meant a steep devaluation of the won, a steep rise in commodity prices, and differentiated increases in wages and rations. This had the collateral advantage of drastically reducing the acquired wealth of market operators, which was denominated in won.

Some observations flow from this. First and foremost, the 2002 measures were seven years or so in contemplation and formulation, and so while they proved problematic, they were in no way half-hearted, hasty or ill-conceived. Rather, they should be treated as a carefully considered response to the government’s underlying agenda of restoring as far as possible its traditional control of the economy. Secondly, while the label ‘reform measures’ has been widely and frequently attached to these measures by outside observers and analysts, the DPRK government itself did not use this label (Lankov 2009). As an aside, we should observe that the DPRK detests the word ‘reform’ because it carries the implication that its canonic, revelatory system has shortcomings and is in need of some kind of overhaul.7 Thus it is not surprising that the measures were directed toward curbing and channelling what was still seen as – almost quite literally – a necessary evil. Thirdly, changes of any significance cannot simply come from pronouncements, but need to be backed up by, and mirrored in, follow-up measures such as on-going policy oversight and fine-tuning, as well as changes to the themes and the tone of public commentary, to institutions and to personnel. None of these was in evidence here, nor have defector interviews revealed much awareness of the 7.1 measures – where indeed people had actually heard of them (Lankov 2009: 57). And so again we are faced with the age-old paradox of observers expecting change to come from within the parameters that had so resolutely kept these changes at bay at tremendous material cost in the past.

The economic results of these measures were as broad as intended. The state-owned enterprises derived little or no benefit since they merely continued to do what they had already been doing for a considerable period of time, the measures did not extend to intra-enterprise transactions, and the government maintained tight control over the commanding heights of the economy. The same applied to the private markets, where on the one hand, traders continued
to operate and probably benefitted from the more substantial, settled markets they began to inhabit, but where the confiscatory monetization measures deeply affected many. Overnight, market traders saw the value of their won holdings tumble, and with their private capital vastly diminished they were once more rendered more dependent on the state. Moreover, these moves unleashed a strong, sustained surge of inflation, the only real defence against which was access to foreign currency. The message for the marketeers on both scores was that if they hoped to stay in business then they needed partnerships with those who had access to foreign currency, a privilege mainly confined to the elite. In this way, the elite began to seize control of the newly marketised areas of the economy from the new entrants.

The state was back, and it continued to assert increasing control over the economic lives of its citizens in the years that followed. This was not always a one-way procession, and some decisions showed a tactical preparedness to accept and abet private economic activity, but the essence lay in pull-back. The China-North Korea border became more tightly patrolled, in 2004 the use of mobile phones was drastically restricted, campaigns against ‘anti-socialist activities’ were again emphasised, and in late 2005 this process led to the reinstatement of a country-wide ban on the private sale of grains and the partial reinstatement of a PDS. These, plus an ensuing raft of regulations limiting private market vendor activities, were only partially effective because of the extent to which the markets had grown, but they left no doubt as to what the leadership regarded as a desirable economic direction.

Any doubt on this score was removed with the announcement on 30 November 2009 of a further series of market-controlling measures in the form of the overnight replacement of the currency by a newly denominated won, accompanied by a number of wages and price adjustments. By this stage, Kim Jong Il had been debilitated to an unknown degree by a stroke in August 2008, but there is no particular reason to blame this for a singularly maladroit policy measure which caused widespread confusion and was speedily countermanded, because in any case, the root cause of what even the Kimists conceded was bad policy in this instance was clear: the government was unsure how far was too far to go in reasserting its prerogatives.

In terms of the regime’s long-established policies and goals, Kim Jong Il cannot be counted as successful in this area, though given the dilemmas involved, it is hard to say what success would have looked like. The government has continued to apply a raft of controlling measures to market activities, but appears to have tacitly acknowledged that since it cannot itself generate the inputs needed to replace those generated by private economic activity, it will have to continue to tolerate them. Haggard and Noland see the 2009 measures as part of a longer-term trend towards the criminalization of market activity and the stripping it of protection from predatory officialdom (Haggard & Noland 2010c), but such discouragement is probably not enough to maintain Kimist economic control in the longer term. The major problem which continues to this day is, as is so often the case in such circumstances, the ‘wrong sort of people’ are conducting market activities, and they are living substantially outside the parameters of government control, whether in the form of workplace or neighbourhood mobilisation, or else through enforcement of the social classification (sŏngbun) system. In Lankov and Kim’s terse description, ‘They present a vital and attractive alternative to the officially promoted life strategy which, as many Koreans came to understand, leads nowhere’ (Lankov & Kim 2008: 71). And here again, since ideologically the government cannot truly debate, or perhaps even properly comprehend, this phenomenon except in terms of the threat it poses, it has remained tooled only for suppression, and apart from allowing more ‘suitable’ people – that is, people with the appropriate social and political status – to gain measures of control over the market, seems otherwise uncertain in its thinking on co-optive strategies.
In theory, at least, in 1994 Kim Jong Il had three broad policy options in front of him: abandon the proudly self-avowed monolithic system he himself had devoted his life to building up, significantly modify this system or else defend it. He may also have opted for a course intermediate of these three. But even if we somehow reprogram him as a closet pragmatist, there were powerful arguments against opting for either of the first two, or any intermediate position between them, for if somehow he were attracted to tinkering with the loosening of Party hegemony, then still-recent events in the former Soviet Bloc, Romania and Albania, were powerful disincentives: there was no future for him or for the Party if he chose that path. Historical timing was crucial here, for without delving too far into counterfactuals, the DPRK would clearly have faced a much less threatening path to modifying its system had it decided to do so in, say, the early 1980s, when the economic tide was clearly turning and differentials with its neighbours were more favourable. But now those differentials had blown out to the extent that this option was far more daunting. Thus we find that Kim chose the option that in any case his whole life’s experience would have pressed him to choose: he opted to seek survival by defending by any means necessary the essentials of the Kim Il Sung system. Despite its obvious weaknesses, this system still had in place an effective police state apparatus which had always been equal to the task of isolating and controlling the population, while it also had extensive military assets, developed with offensive intent, but also of course serviceable in the survivalist cause. Moreover, the option of playing for time, while not always distinguishable from attempting to delay the inevitable, should not automatically be dismissed as a poor option – it is a time-honoured practice in statecraft.

Thus it is not surprising that we seem unable to identify distinctive Kim Jong Il strategies and policies which depart from those pursued while Kim Il Sung was alive. Like his father, he energetically pursued and sustained the country’s drive to secure a nuclear weapons arsenal and payload delivery system, and essentially organised the state economy around the pursuit of this objective. Likewise, the tenor and tempo of inter-Korean talks in 2000 and 2007 conformed to the pattern followed by his father in 1972–73, 1984–86 and 1990–93 of tactical engagement, quick assessment of prospects for even trivial gains at the South’s expense, the signing of wide-ranging agreements, and then a staged retreat amid accusations of bad faith to avoid unwanted implementation measures. Moreover, Kim Jong Il’s military-first reorganization of government simply carried forward a trend that had already become marked in the last years of his father’s rule (Buzo 1999: 211ff). The single area of arguable discontinuity was in permitting space for private market activities – arguable because we do not know what Kim Il Sung might have done if he had faced a comparable disastrous famine, though we are safe in surmising from his record that the elder Kim would have demonstrated a similar brand of threat analysis and ruthless response.

The Kim Jong Il era is also noteworthy for what did not occur. No meaningful systemic reform measures were put in place, but nor did the much-predicted economic collapse of the DPRK occur. And despite the enormous pressures that the system was operating under, no significant purges took place, nor did other signs of disarray appear in leadership circles, in itself a somewhat remarkable reflection on the resilience of the Kimist system, but also one toward which we must assume Kim Jong Il made a significant contribution. One cannot just walk in and assume power in Pyongyang. The rules of the game are complicated and obscure, institutional rules and procedures are seriously degraded to facilitate leadership intervention, and this leadership is in turn exercised in a ruthless, personalised fashion in the setting of lip-service to an exacting, anachronistic ideology. It is not a game for dilettantes. Amid all this, beyond...
the odd public execution, not only do we have little credible evidence of major purges or internal disputes, but in government too, cabinet ministers, essentially bureaucrats whose task it was to find ways and means of implementing the instructions of the leadership, came and went, occasionally suffering demotion, dismissal or worse, and the rubber-stamp Supreme People’s Assembly continued to meet. New institutions, such as the National Defence Committee, nominally under the SPA but in fact the supreme decision-making body, flourished, while other institutions with their roots in the regime’s receding Marxist-Leninist past, such as the Workers’ Party of Korea, atrophied. Allowing for ideological distortions, and with the partial exception of the November 2009 measures, the overall impression remains of steady, orderly strategic assertion and, where necessary, tactical retreat in policy. By this we are also saying that state-directed violence, principally through the extensive gulag system, proceeded in an organised, controlled and effective manner. Significant pockets of dysfunctionality and incoherence obviously exist throughout the DPRK government and bureaucracy, but observations over time suggest that a lot of what the leadership believes it has to do well it tends to do well, while chaos, inefficiency and counter-productivity often seem to indicate lower priorities.

Similarly, Kim’s handling of his cult of personality is rarely analysed, but it also suggests careful calculation. Cult of personality serves a number of needs and ends. To Stalin, its originator, it was foremost an effective political weapon for subverting the Party and consolidating his authority, and the personal gratification he may have derived from it appears to have been secondary. As an avid Stalinist, Kim Il Sung also adopted this weapon, but the element of ego gratification seemed far more pronounced, as anyone who got to witness firsthand the manner in which Kim received such adulation probably observed. But with Kim Jong II one appears to return to the purer Stalinist cult-as-political-asset model. He accepted the adulation – indeed, he could do no less as son of the Great Leader, but he did not appear to relish it, and remained a remote leader. More important, he astutely identified wherein his chief asset lay, and so the cult remained essentially the cult of Kim II Sung, which continued to be energetically propagated on many fronts, ranging from statuary (a form of tribute his son deliberately and pointedly avoided) and portraiture to apotheosis as Eternal President, and the inception of the new Juche Calendar in 1997, which designated the year of the older Kim’s birth (1912) as Juche 1.

Assessing how much of Kim Jong Il’s achievement is likely to endure also sheds light on his effectiveness. Comparing the DPRK of 1994 with the DPRK of today, the external perception is of the same isolated, pariah status, the same reprehensible commitment to nuclear weapons, the same appalling human rights record, and, with the partial exception of China, the same set of shadowy economic relations with shadowy states on the fringes of the international system, based primarily on the arms trade. Within North Korea, we see a malnourished, terrorized general population which, outside the privileged enclave of Pyongyang and its environs, mainly conducts a daily struggle for survival. The government applies the same dogmatic, dysfunctional ideology, informed by Stalinist methods, if no longer by strict Stalinist practice, and modifies these only in the name of tactical expediency. Most tellingly, there is no end in sight. Some may therefore suggest that in stripping away the false and misleading images of Kim that abound, all we are doing is revealing the real tyranny underneath. How, then, can we call such leadership effective?

And yet, from a Kimist perspective, ‘positives’ are present, even if they sometimes look like the mere dividends of persistence. The political, social and economic challenges posed by free market activities continue to be contained, even though the scale and variety of these challenges must make this seem like a daunting task, for it is true to say that since the 1990s, people have increasingly departed from the previous collectivist model, and through economic necessity have
had to make individual and family-focused judgements on how to survive and even make a living. For the many who now engage in some form of market activity, this involves a change from passive acceptance of the *status quo* to proactive planning and execution, aided by the authorities’ retreat from active oversight in many areas of its citizen’s lives, a consequence of its own lack of economic means, and the dependence of mainly lower level officials on bribery and corruption for their livelihood.

However, so far these trends have not led to any great flowering of civil society above the level of mainly petty economic activity and the sampling of forbidden fruits of consumerism for those who can afford them. The porous border with China is regularly breeched by contraband such as South Korean videos, and this has of course exacerbated cognitive dissonance as more and more people see the gap between the daily realities they experience and the official version of that reality. On some abstract plane this may well shorten the life of the regime but, for the moment, while people may know far more about their predicament and may be more aware of the true dimensions of their rulers’ mendacity, they are none the wiser about possible ways out of it, and so as yet, we cannot yet detect any signs of a dissident movement; the state control apparatus still clearly remains too strong, too motivated, and too ruthless. Thus one can still only speculate on the role this nascent civil society will play in future political events.

International trends are not uniformly negative, especially if one sees them through ideology glasses. China has remained a consistent, if at times reluctant, supporter in some crucial areas, less hindered by moral scruple, responsive to growing economic involvement, seeking to contain the situation, probably hoping for the best but certainly fearful the worst. In the area of food aid, its intervention was crucial in helping the DPRK to withstand international pressure and maintain control over the aid donation process. Moreover, broader trends such as the overall fraying of the international order, the increasing propensity of states such as China, Russia and Iran to challenge elements of that order, the continuing fallout from the Arab Spring, the growth of the Shiite–Sunni divide, and the increase in the number of states suffering from varying degrees of serious dysfunctionality are all trends which are opening up economic opportunities for the DPRK and its chief cash crop – serious weaponry – and this trend may well expand, rather than diminish in coming years.

In addition, whether from fatigue, impatience or frustration, a curious tolerance of the DPRK seems to have grown as outside observers become more and more inured to its behaviour. One finds a case being put for DPRK exceptionalism – that is, negotiating with the DPRK, which of course usually means granting concessions, on the grounds (well appreciated by DPRK strategists) that some form of dialogue is better than no dialogue. This is despite DPRK policies and practices that pose a fundamental challenge to key elements of the international order, ranging from the NPT to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and it keeps avenues open for a whole range of consequence-free behavior. One facet of this is the tendency of influential people, and even leaders, in adversarial nations, whether for reasons laudable, less than laudable or just plain obscure, to go to considerable lengths in order to secure what they seem to believe to be an important place in history by achieving some sort of breakthrough in Korea. This has been especially true in the ROK in the past, but it has also influenced the thinking of other main actors. Again, the DPRK is well attuned to this phenomenon and has adroitly harvested the significant tactical and material advantages this tendency has brought.

How effective, then, was Kim Jong Il in pursuing the goals of the DPRK leadership and elite? As we consider the crises of the last twenty years, space limitations prevent us from discussing the DPRK in the full range of its complexities, and in the full range of the evidentiary and methodological challenges it presents, but it is probably obvious where all this is headed: unless
we dismiss much of the accumulated historical record, unless we attach minimal importance to
the role of leadership in the Kimist system, and unless we insert our own a priori judgements
based on what we believe the leader should have done, could have done, or might have done,
we find that Kim Jong Il was a convinced, effective Kimist who achieved considerable success
in pursuing a difficult and demanding set of goals. The fact these goals are almost entirely despised
by the international community, just as he himself appears to be despised by many North Koreans,
should not distract us from absorbing the implications of this achievement. It is now twenty
years since he first assumed full power, and the same policies are essentially still in place with
little sign of strategic confusion or doubt. They have therefore stood a reasonable test of time,
even though some might question how much more success of this type the DPRK can stand.
While Kim Jong-un was less prepared for leadership, and may possibly be less able than Kim
Jong Il, his father left an important legacy by enforcing Kimist parameters in a disciplined manner
over an extended period of time. Kim Jong Il may not conform to many people’s concept of
a Dear Leader, but he certainly performed as a significant consolidator.

Notes

1 Kim also conducted significant negotiations, including two leadership summits, with the ROK in
response to Seoul's Sunshine Policy, and effected major changes to the structure of government,
institutionalising the central role of the military and further marginalising the Workers' Party of Korea.
They are important issues, but space does not permit their discussion here.

2 Kimism must be defined not from theory, but from the body of practice we see in the DPRK. It
draws on the essentials of Stalinism, such as a mass (as opposed to an elite) communist party; an intensive
coercion and control apparatus; a high degree of political mobilisation; cult of personality; reliance on
canonical pronouncements of a genius-leader; adherence to the doctrine of the intensification of class
struggle; economic autarky; the collectivisation and industrialization of agriculture; rapid heavy
industrialisation through mass economic mobilisation; Stakhanovite work practices (‘speed battles’ in
a DPRK context); and a heavy reliance on ideological motivation. To this mix Kim Il Sung brought
little in the way of innovation, but emphasised elements drawn more directly from his own experience,
most notably pervasive militarism; a rigid, hereditary class system based on assessments of political
reliability (songbun); a pronounced hostile, predatory attitude toward external transactions; strong
intervention in the traditionally self-regulatory areas of Korean family and clan affairs – perhaps the
most salient of the many reasons why applying the term ‘Confucianist’ to this system is grossly misleading;
indifference to the norms of civil society; and moral puritanism. For more on this see Buzo (1999).


5 The complexities of the DPRK economy are a topic in themselves. A useful perspective here is Habib
(2011), who argues that the disasters of the 1990s caused ‘the splintering of the old command system
into parallel economies – the official, military, illicit, court and entrepreneurial economies – separated
from the central planning matrix.’ This describes the curious amalgam of DPRK-style pragmatism and
expediency, and helps us to understand the phenomenon of DPRK economic resilience.

6 The inauguration of Kim Dae Jung as President of the Republic of Korea in February 1998 inaugurated
the ten-year period of Seoul’s Sunshine Policy toward the North. This policy placed engagement at
the centre of ROK policymaking, featuring disavowal of any moves to absorb the North and the
active promotion of economic cooperation and exchange, while still emphasising that the ROK would
not tolerate armed provocation.

7 Hence Moon Chung In’s comment “You have to be careful about not using the word ‘reform’; they
References


