

**Prospects for Change After
Kim Jong Il**

By

**C. Kenneth Quinones
Dean of Research
Akita International University - Japan**

For

Newsweek Japan

December 21, 2011

Kim Jong Il has gone to meet his maker. He proved to be no different from every mortal human being. His passing recalls memories of his father Kim Il Sung's death in July 1994. I was the US Department of State's North Korea Affairs officer assigned to the US delegation to the nuclear negotiations with North Korea. I was in a Geneva, Switzerland hotel sleeping after an intense day of negotiation. Early in the morning a ringing telephone abruptly aroused me. It was Yokoi-san, a Japanese diplomat and friend, calling to say that Pyongyang radio and TV were playing sad music. Rumors were rampant that Kim Il Sung had died. Could the US government confirm this?

I called the State Department operations center in Washington, DC to ask the same question. Their answer, "We do not know!" Next I called the temporary White House in Rome where President Clinton was on a state visit. I got the same answer. I called my secret contact, a CNN correspondent assigned to cover the US-DPRK negotiations. I asked him to call Pyongyang, something I could not do without the Secretary of State's written permission. I told my friend to contact the TASS (Russian) reporter I had met in Pyongyang in October 1993. Twenty minutes later CNN had its scoop and I had my confirmation – Kim Il Sung had died. After informing the State Department and the White House, I called the North Korean embassy in Geneva. They did not believe me but within an hour they too had their confirmation. Later I was awarded a much cherished Kim Il Sung badge for my effort.

What followed Kim Il Sung's death closely paralleled what recently transpired after Kim Jong Il's death. First came a rush of speculation that North Korea might experience a power struggle and that the military might launch a surprise attack on South Korea. These concerns were soon replaced by the hope that Kim Jong Il would transform North Korea. Hindsight confirms this was wistful thinking. Once again the fear of provocative military action is being replaced by wistful thinking that North Korea could undergo a transformation under its new ruler. Similarity between thinking then and now suggests continuity in the shallowness of understanding of North Korean society. For too long too many "Pyongyang watchers" have focused on the North Korean ruler's short stature and over size sunglasses while paying marginal attention to more substantive matters.

An old adage teaches that, "It takes two hands to clap." If we want North Korea to change, we outsiders need to first consider how we can encourage change. Our efforts in this regard have been woefully lacking. War is not the answer. The Korean War failed to achieve what all Koreans want, and what would best ensure peace, prosperity and stability in Northeast Asia, Korea's unification. Instead the Korean War crystallized Korea's division. Koreans killed Koreans, families were destroyed and divided, and the land devastated. A second Korean War would only intensify and expand the zone of agony and destruction.

After the Korean War, both sides engaged in a dangerous and sometimes global contest to undermine the other regime. The two Koreas, encouraged and aided by their superpower allies with military and economic aid, engaged in confrontation and containment. While North Korea relied on covert subversion and terrorism, the United States assisted South Korea in an effort to diplomatically and economically isolate North Korea. This only deepened and prolonged the gap between the two Koreas. Today this rivalry poses an even greater threat to peace, prosperity and stability, not just in northeast Asia but to all of human society because of North Korea's nuclear

capability. Hopefully there still is time to pursue a new strategy that will transform North Korea into a less hostile and dangerous society. Otherwise one day we will wake up to learn that North Korea has married a nuclear bomb to a ballistic missile. This will force us to recognize that economic sanctions and/or inducements, and diplomatic pressure and/or negotiations cannot bring about North Korea's nuclear disarmament and Korea's unification.

Our best option just might be to engage and strive to transform North Korea much the same way that the United States and its European and East Asian allies have done with the "evil empire," i.e. the Soviet Union, and "Red China," now referred to as China. But first we need to refurbish our understanding of North Korea.

The following assessment and suggestions reflect twenty years of visiting, living and working in North Korea as a diplomat, humanitarian worker, scholar and tourist. My first visit was in December 1992 and most recent in September 2010. I have dealt with all levels of the society, from Kim Il Sung and Premier Kim Yong-nam, to negotiations with diplomats and army generals, and chats with professors, students, waiters, drivers and farmers. To this I have added extensive reading of everything from North Korea's daily press to collections of historical documents and academic publications. Nine years of living in and studying South Korea have further broadened and deepened my perspective of Korea, both north and south.

North Korea is neither uniquely secretive nor reclusive. Secrecy is not unique to North Korea. Governments and military establishments everywhere selectively shield their deliberations and resources from public scrutiny. North Korea's distinction is that it is a closed society. The majority of North Koreans are denied access to information about the world beyond their national borders. The ruling elite, however, have access to the information needed to perform official duties, be it policy formulation, military planning, engagement in international business or maintenance of a technologically advanced arsenal and industry.

One of the most visible changes in Pyongyang since my first visit in 1992 is the growing presence of foreigners from around the world. Literally thousands of them visit, live and work there today. They include diplomats, businessmen, professors, engineers with foreign firms such as Egypt's Orscom and tourists from around the world, including the United States and European Union. The flow is not one way. Small groups of North Koreans are studying in Europe, North America, and Africa. Much larger numbers can be found in China and Russia. For example in August 2011, I had several extended discussions with North Korean scholars who attended a conference at the University of British Columbia where a few North Koreans are studying international business.

A towering structure dominates Pyongyang's skyline - the 105 story high Ryugwang Building. Long nothing more than an empty gray pile of concrete, a Swiss engineering firm is transforming it into Pyongyang's International Business Center. When completed in 2012, the Japanese established Pyongyang Computer Center will move across the street to the refurbished business center. German, Hong Kong, Chinese, Russian and many other international businessmen that I encountered in 2010 will then rent offices and apartments in the Ryugwang Building.

This opening to the outside world dates from the end of Kim Il Sung's reign and picked up momentum during Kim Jong Il's rule. First Kim Il Sung reordered national priorities, putting regime survival before national unification. To achieve this new priority, he and his son recognized the need to gradually open their society and bring in new knowledge and technology. That process has made halting progress since the end of the Cold War. Kim Jong Il went so far as to declare that he would transform his domain into a "Strong and Prosperous Nation" by 2012.

Unfortunately few foreign government leaders and politicians have recognized North Korea's reordered priorities and intentions except for China and Russia. Over the past 20 years, the United States, South Korea and Japan have vacillated between trying to either bring about North Korea's collapse or to change it. Because of this vacillation, they have little to show for their effort. But China and Russia since 2008 have shifted from similar vacillation to a consistent effort to promote change within North Korea. Their intention is to open the society and draw it into the international community for the purpose of making North Korea a less dangerous and hostile nation that is intertwined with international institutions and thus more likely to respect international norms of behavior.

One of the greatest challenges facing Kim Jong Il's successor Jong Eun is his ability to continue North Korea's hesitant opening and engagement of the international community. But why would North Korea's "supreme leader" be so cautious if indeed he is all powerful?

Again we need to correct conventional wisdom. North Korea's leaders are not supermen with unrestricted political might as portrayed in the international press. They do not simply issue commands. Pyongyang's political system and politics are much more complex. The nation's political culture is defined by the widely misunderstood ideology of *Juje* which usually is incorrectly translated as "self-reliance." Actually the word is better translated as "self determination." When he formulated the ideology in the early 1950s, Kim Il Sung's intention was to declare independence from Moscow and Beijing. His ideology declares that North Korea's leaders will determine their nation's future according to their assessment of the nation's needs and priorities, not as dictated by foreign leaders and ideologies such as Marxism.

Kim's ideology is a blend of nationalism, socialism and Confucianism. It declares that Man, not laws of history, guide and shape human society. Thus for North Korea, the true sculptor of society is the "great leader," not Marx's inhuman historical forces. *Juje* imposes a rigid mold on society to maximize the nation's strength by compelling all its members to conform to the same goals and norms. In Confucian terms, the goal is social harmony which is to be achieved through selflessness and loyalty to one's superiors. In *Juje* a single person is delegated the authority to oversee society - the "Great Leader." He and his successors play the same role that China's emperors once performed. Similarly, succession in North Korea, as was true in imperial China, is hereditary and not subject to the whims of shifting political trends. *Juje's* designation of a "great leader" is where Kim Il Sung parted company with Karl Marx. Kim's great leader has the ability to over ride historical trends and guide North Korean society as he deems best for the Korean people.

But what qualified Kim Il Sung and his sons to declare themselves the great leader? This is at the very core of Pyongyang's politics. Within the Confucian tradition, the ruler must demonstrate

his benevolence and compassion for his followers. Like the founders of China's dynasties, Kim Il Sung earned his political legitimacy in battle. He is credited with having led the anti-Japanese forces that defeated the Japanese imperialists prior to national liberation in 1945. Similarly, he is credited with having led the Korean People's Army (KPA) to victory against the United States imperialists in the Korean War. Here, less important to the people of North Korea is what we know to be facts. For them, the important thing is that they believe what they have been taught. To challenge this is to threaten social unity and thus to weaken the nation's strength, i.e. an act of treason.

Kim Jong Il naturally accepted most of his father's teachings, but he did make a major change. His father, despite his extensive military experience, had relied more heavily on the civilian Korean Workers' Party (KWP) than the Korean People's Army (KPA) to govern. The KWP performed the dual role of managing the government and educating the population in *Juche*. The KPA's role was limited to defending the nation from foreign enemies such as the United States, Japan and South Korea. But Kim Jong Il revised this in 1998 when he declared "Military First Politics," (*songun chongji*). The younger Kim's increased reliance on the KPA is further indicated by his elevation of the National Defense Commission (NDC) to the highest deliberative body in government and staffing of it with a majority of active duty generals. In 2011, powerful and prominent generals in the National Defense Commission included: Minister of the People's Armed Forces and former Chief of the General Staff Kim Yong-chun, Chief of the General Staff Ri Yong-ho, who also serves as vice chairman of the KWP's Central Military Commission, and the aging Vice Marshal and first vice chairman of the NDC Jo Myong-rok.

We cannot say for certain what convinced Kim Jong Il to make this shift, but we can attempt an educated guess. Unlike his father, Kim Jong Il did not earn but merely inherited his legitimacy. He came to power without accomplishments. To ensure success of his succession and to rally support for his policies, he needed the ardent support of society's most powerful political entity – the Korean People's Army.

By the 1990s, the KPA not only maintained a huge standing army in excess of one million people, it controlled an extensive and technologically advanced "second economy" that sustained itself by exporting military equipment. The KPA was the regime's most technologically advanced sector and the training ground for most young North Koreans needed to operate the modern machinery of civilian industry. The KPA also maintained its own network of relationships with North Korea's most reliable ally, China.

While the KPA's star was rising in the 1990s, the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) and its Youth League had succumbed to the temptations of capitalistic materialism and engaged in corrupt practices for the sake of selfish personal profit. Purges cleansed these organizations of corrupt and disloyal members between 1994 and 1998. Apparently for these and possibly less obvious reasons, Kim Jong Il decided by 1998 to forge a political alliance with the KPA. During his 17 year reign, he surrounded himself with generals, decorated them with medals and showered them with promotions and expensive gifts such as imported cars, watches and liquor, among other things.

As early as 1995 North Korean diplomats complained of the KPA's growing influence on policy. The KPA occasionally did its best to undermine the US-DPRK Agreed Framework of 1994. An example of this was the KPA's shooting down of a US Army helicopter two months after the agreement had been signed. Efforts to open liaison offices in each nation's capital was blocked by KPA refusal to allow US diplomats to shuttle between Pyongyang and Seoul via Panmunjom. The KPA infiltration of heavily armed commandoes into South Korea in the 1990s certainly did not encourage mutual trust essential for effective implementation of the bilateral agreement. At that time my official duties required that I live and work at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, a KPA installation, and assist with negotiations between the KPA and the US Army regarding the recovery of Korean War era US soldiers' remains. On numerous occasions I was compelled to complain to the Foreign Ministry about KPA reluctance to fulfill commitments.

One of the most visible indication of the KPA's growing involvement in policy formulation and implementation came when in 1999 KPA Field Marshal Cho Myong-rok visit to Washington, D.C. The US government had invited Pyongyang's chief nuclear negotiator First Vice Minister Kang Sok-ju, but a high ranking general arrived instead. Then, to the US government's amazement, the general changed from civilian suit to full dress military uniform for his visit to the White House and meeting with President Clinton. The message was clear – the KPA had indeed become a formidable power in Pyongyang's policy formulation.

Between 2001 and 2011, the United States, Japan and South Korea have struggled, with the occasional assistance of China and Russia, to shut down North Korea's nuclear program. The effort stalled in 2006 for various reasons. The KPA ever since has repeatedly expressed its opposition to giving up its nuclear arsenal unless the United States withdraws its military forces from northeast Asia. In other words, Kim Jong Il's "military first" doctrine has emboldened the KPA to set terms for ending North Korea's nuclear program, something not evident prior to 1998.

During Kim Jong Il's final years the KPA has played an increasingly assertive role in policy formulation. This became evident in 2010 when it sank a South Korea naval vessel in the Yellow Sea west of North Korea's west coast and then bombarded a small island just south of the so-called Northern Limit Line (NLL). Like all north-south disputes, this one has a long history. The NLL was unilaterally drawn by an American commander of the United Nations Command at least thirty years ago. The purpose was to prevent South Korean naval vessels and fishing boats from sailing too close to North Korea's southwest coast. But South Korea has unilaterally declared the line a territorial border between the two Koreas. North Korea for more than twenty years has contested South Korea's claim. Finally in 2008, South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun and his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong Il agreed to bilateral negotiations to resolve the dispute. Not long afterward Lee Myung-bak became South Korea's president and he discarded the agreement. This angered the KPA. For two years South Korea ignored or deflected the KPA's calls for the promised bilateral negotiation.

At this point Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke, and turned his attention to designating his successor. KPA influence on policy subsequently surged. In 2009 and 2010, while Pyongyang's leader recovered from his stroke, the KPA asserted itself regarding policy on the nuclear negotiations and dealing with South Korea. This is implied by the KPA General Staff's issuance of eleven

policy statements in 2009 and another six in 2010, a clear departure from the norm. Previously the Foreign Ministry had monopolized the issuance of policy statements.

Why did North Korea's leader not restrain the KPA from attacking South Korea on two occasions in 2010? A possible answer is that he lacked the political strength to challenge the generals' decisions. More important to him was ensuring the regime's survival by confirming the KPA's support for his chosen successor. Like him, this son was to inherit the title of "supreme commander" without any military experience, making his legitimacy similarly weak in the KPA's eyes. Possibly the government in Pyongyang condoned the attacks on South Korea to win the KPA's favor and support for the chosen successor. This is only an educated guess, and we may never know the full truth. But when I suggested this possibility to North Koreans in 2011, they cautioned me not to express such an idea in public since it suggested that their leader was not all powerful.

Given Kim Jong Il's preference for the KPA over the KWP since 1998, it does not seem likely that Jang Seong-taek, Kim's brother-in-law by marriage to Kim's younger sister Kim Kyong-hui, possess greater political power than senior generals. Some "Pyongyang watchers" in Seoul claim that this is the case, going so far as to assert that Jang is successor Kim Jong Eun's regent. Jang is known to be a wealthy businessman who at times managed the Kim family's financial assets. But his political fortunes have risen and fallen. His close relationship to Kim Jong Il failed to prevent him from being purged from power in 2004. Two years later he began a comeback that peaked with his appointment in 2010 to the National Defense Commission. Obviously the appointment confirms the cleansing of his political record, but it does not necessarily translate into superior political influence. Kim Jong Il, like his father, appointed all immediate family members to government office. Thus Kim's younger sister Kyong-hui holds a ministerial portfolio in the Administrative Council, but this does not make her a powerful political figure. Also, now that Kim Jong Il has passed away, chances are that his brother-in-law's political influence will fade. As for the possibility of regency for Kim Jong Eun, there is little evidence, if any, upon which to base such a claim. Actually Kim Jong Eun is credited with having Ju Sang-song, a political ally of Jang Seong-taek, removed as head of the People's Security Agency, allegedly to curb Jang's influence. Successor Kim appears to be quite comfortable with the generals who almost always surround him during public appearances. Such visual imagery is highly significant in a society like North Korea because it conveys to the rank and file in the KPA and KWP who is closest and thus most trusted by the leader.

Our analysis once again challenges conventional wisdom that North Korea's "supreme commander" was an absolute dictator. On the contrary, it would appear that:

- the original "great leader's" political legitimacy was closely tied to his role as military leader,
- that his successor the "supreme commander's" claim to political legitimacy was weak relative to his father, and
- thus he felt compelled to elevate the KPA's role above that of the KWP regarding governing the nation and formulating national policy.

If accurate, this assessment could profoundly impact prospects for change under North Korea's new "supreme commander" Kim Jong-eun. Given his youth, inexperience in government and

life, he would appear to be even more prone to depend on generals as his primary advisers. This suggests the possibility of greater reluctance to quicken the pace of change within the society, particularly away from the policies of his predecessors. Similarly, we should anticipate greater hesitancy, even reluctance to agree to phase out North Korea's nuclear program. In the final analysis, prospects for change in North Korea, at least in the immediate and mid-term future, appear marginal at best.