



# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## E-NOTES

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## UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA

By Kongdan Oh



*Kongdan Oh is a Resident Staff Member of the Institute for Defense Analyses and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow of the Brookings Institution. She is co-author of The Hidden People of North Korea (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009) and North Korea Through the Looking Glass (Brookings, 2000).*

When the third son of dying leader Kim Jong-il was designated as the successor of his ailing father in December 2011, the media asked me to comment on the young (28 or 29) Kim's inclination to reform North Korea's politics and economy. Journalists pointed out that Kim Jong-un had received several years of education in Switzerland, where he could savor prosperity and freedom. Moreover, as a relatively young leader, he might favor new ways of doing things. He might, in short, reveal himself to be a reformer. Interestingly, this is what many people said about Kim Jong-il when he took over after his father's death. The reformation of North Korea would make a great story for the media, but most of life is humdrum and repetitive rather than newsworthy and so I did not expect anything new from the young Kim. My favorite cautionary example was the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad of Syria, whose four years of post-graduate school in London failed to turn him into a political reformer when he took over from his father.

Not long after Kim Jong-un came to power, he was frequently seen in public with a woman who turned out to be his wife. Again I was asked if this was a sign of change. Kim's father, who had at least one wife and numerous mistresses, never appeared in public with any of them, and North Koreans knew better than to ask whether their leader was married. Once again we can turn to Assad, whose wife was raised and educated in England but has not had an appreciable influence on the political attitudes of her husband.

I have been studying North Korea for over three decades. Back in the year 2000 I co-authored a book with my research partner, Ralph Hassig, titled *North Korea through the Looking Glass*. The title was meant to suggest that North Korea is just the opposite of what Westerners are familiar with. Most of the book was written during the period when Kim Jong-il seemed to have abdicated leadership and abandoned the North Korean people to suffering and famine—a dramatic change from the days when his father (assisted by Kim Jong-il) kept a firm grip on the lives of his people. Optimists saw the younger Kim's abdication of power as a possible harbinger of political, economic, and social change. Yet, we were not convinced that Kim had adopted any kind of new thinking. Rather, we believed the North Korean press when it quoted Kim as saying, "Expect no change from me."

Over a decade later, North Korea's newest leader has taken firm control from the outset. He has purged those whose loyalty he questions. He has strengthened control over the border with China to reduce the flow of North Korean defectors. Although it was rumored that he favored some modest rural reforms, he has failed to announce or implement them. And most discouragingly, he has devoted most of his attention to preparing his people psychologically for another Korean War. Against the express wishes of the Chinese, who provide most of the economic support for the North Korean people, Kim has sided with the army and moved ahead with missile and nuclear development. Toward South Korea, the United States, and Japan, the North Korean regime has issued increasingly harsh threats of impending war.

South Korea's new president, Mrs. Park Guen-Hye, has offered to implement a trust-building process with North

Korea, and her unification minister has said that South Korea is willing to resume humanitarian aid to the North. In the United States, critics of the Obama administration have likewise suggested that a softer approach to North Korea might pay dividends. This strain of optimism is to be found at the beginning of every new administration, but in my opinion it is not the case that previous administrations have missed something. They have tried and become discouraged. Unlike his father, who back in 1994 at least pretended to be willing to make accommodations with the international community when it came to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, Kim Jong-un has spurned offers of reconciliation and is staking North Korea's future on Chinese willingness to support his regime, despite the obvious dissatisfaction of the Chinese.

It would seem that Kim Jong-un can only be moved by the wrath of his people or by strong pressure from the Chinese. No one else has leverage over him. China voted for the most recent UN resolution on additional sanctions against North Korea following Pyongyang's third nuclear test, but whether the Chinese leadership will back up their sanction vote with action remains to be seen. In the past they have spectacularly failed to do so, fearing regional instability more than possible nuclear proliferation.

During my visit to China in November 2012, young Chinese intellectuals and party cadres expressed to me their unhappiness with the Kim regime, although they know better than to directly contradict official Chinese policy. "The 'First Fat,' Kim Il-sung, was sort of a comrade to us, fighting against the colonial Japanese. The 'Second Fat,' his son Kim Jong-il, was disliked by most Chinese but we continued to support North Korea. Now this 'Third Fat,' Kim Jong-un, seems to be the worst of the lot." China's new leadership may continue with its traditional "noninterference policy" for a while, but the young Chinese elites have already lost patience with their troublesome neighbor, a fact that Kim Jong-un and his supporters must surely be aware of.

#### INSIDE THE TWO NORTH KOREAS

North Korea today is not one republic but two: A "Pyongyang Republic" and a "Republic of Everyone Else." The distinction is both geographical and political. The capital city Pyongyang is clean, orderly, and modestly prosperous. Pyongyangites, most of them Party members, dress better than they used to, buy food at restaurants and street-side stalls, and talk on their cell phones. Foreign visitors, expecting to see a land of starving people, are impressed. The regime has the power to make the city—or the most visible parts of the city—to its own specifications. After all, there is no private enterprise to interfere with government plans. Kim Jong-un and the top elites live even better than the other citizens of Pyongyang. No matter how many economic sanctions are placed on North Korea, there always seems to be enough money to support the political elites, with plenty left over for nuclear weapons and missiles.

Outside Pyongyang, North Korea is a different world. In 2009 Ralph and I wrote *The Hidden People of North Korea*. These are the people we were talking about. In Pyongyang, the main streets are as wide as parking lots. Outside the city, most roads are unpaved. Vehicles are few and far between (even visitors to Pyongyang can see that). Trains creep along twisted tracks. Although North Koreans have more freedom to travel than they used to (not officially but unofficially), they mostly hitchhike to get to their destinations. Travelers pay bribes of homemade wine and cigarettes to get rides on military trucks, or they simply trudge along the side of the road. People are thinner and much more poorly dressed than they are in Pyongyang. They are also hungrier and sicker. Only local party leaders and the black-market entrepreneurs who bribe them are pear-shaped; everyone else is banana shaped.

#### HOW CAN THE KIM REGIME BE MOVED?

The United States has long appealed to China to put more pressure on North Korea to stop its nuclear and missile programs and initiate economic reforms. The Chinese have by and large resisted this appeal and instead repeatedly called on "all parties" to remain calm and work out their differences in the Six Party Talks, hosted by China but not convened since 2008. For that matter, neither the United States nor South Korea officially favors any sort of political revolution in North Korea, preferring to wait until something causes the regime to change its own mind.

If China cannot be moved, and neither the United States nor South Korea is willing to do more than call on the Kim regime to reform, can 23 million North Koreans take their fate into their own hands? Since the famine of 1995-1998, when the government stopped providing food to most of its citizens, they have pursued a bottom-up economic revolution and now survive for the most part by their own means, even though these means are mostly illegal. Not

having the wherewithal to care for its people, the Kim regime has acquiesced to this revolution, although it occasionally cracks down on private enterprise and continues to insist that socialism is the only acceptable economic system.

Interpreting the regime's acquiescence to private enterprise as a softening of its views, some politicians, political pundits, and analysts in the United States argue that our government should initiate high-level talks with the Kim regime, agree to North Korean demands to sign a peace treaty replacing the 1953 Armistice Agreement, and normalize diplomatic relations with the government in Pyongyang. These actions would satisfy some, but hardly all, of the demands North Korea has made on the United States. In my opinion, the United States tried its best to reach an agreement in 1994 but the effort ultimately failed. Part of the fault lay with the United States, which, as a democracy, was unable to fulfill all of the obligations that the Clinton White House had made. Much of the fault lay with North Korea, which arguably had no intention of actually giving up its nuclear weapons, but rather was playing the United States for all it could get. Regardless of how blame for the agreement's ultimate failure is allocated, the failure itself exemplifies the theme of our *Looking Glass* book: that the two countries are on opposite sides of most issues and can no more meet in the middle than a person can pass through a looking glass—except in a dream.

Almost everyone who tries to deal with North Korea, politically, economically, or socially, comes to realize that this is an almost impossible country to deal with. There is an obvious reason for North Korea's recalcitrance: only by keeping itself separate from the modern world can the regime hope to perpetuate itself generation after generation. People often forget that the regime has been a great success, even though the country is a basket case. The first two Kims lived lives of luxury (after the elder Kim established himself as leader) and died natural deaths. The third Kim presumably believes he can do no better than follow in their footsteps. He and his supporters have little reason to change their policies because they do not suffer from international sanctions or their ruinous economic policies.

So what about the 23 million citizens of North Korea who are not living a life of luxury? Do they have the will and the means to change their condition? Human beings are highly adaptable. The North Korean people have learned how to make their own living, even if for most of them it is not a very good living. They live in constant fear of punishment; most of them endure a measure of hunger and sickness. But this has always been the case. They have never had political power, and the few who have tried to resist the regime have been quickly arrested and put away in prison camps. Hope is the last word in the people's dictionary. For them, the scope for change is their immediate economic environment, nothing more.

Koreans living in both halves of the peninsula are a hardy and resourceful people. South Korea in the 1950s was in many respects not that much different from North Korea. Both countries were dictatorships and both were poor (North Korea actually got an economic jump on South Korea in the 50s and 60s). In the 1960s, under the authoritarian president Park Chung-hee (the father of the current president), South Korea experienced an economic revolution—instituted by the government rather than the people. Only in the 1980s did the government gradually relinquish its authoritarian powers and move toward full democracy, which arrived in the early 1990s after years of popular demonstrations. Arguably the key difference between political fates of the two Koreas was that the United States had a large military presence in South Korea and successive Korean governments recognized their dependence on the Americans. This presence, and South Korea's desire to join the international community, constrained the South Korean presidents in their use of force against protesting citizens.

The United States has no presence in North Korea. Kim Jong-un's only constraints are the fear that the Chinese might someday pull the plug on his economy, and the fear that his hard-line military might turn against him. As a far away force, is there anything the United States *can* do to help the North Korean people stand up for themselves against their government? In the final pages of our *Hidden People* book we suggested that the only way North Korea would change is if its ordinary citizens took it upon themselves to bring about change, and we recommended that foreigners do everything in their power to provide the North Korean people with information about their government and the outside world to empower themselves. The United States has extended very modest assistance to North Korean defectors who have devoted their lives to transmitting information back to their comrades in the North. But beyond that the United States, with its hands full in the Middle East, has been unwilling to go.

The Obama administration's official policy toward North Korea is "strategic patience." The virtue of this policy is that it does not stir up any hornet nests. The weakness is that it fails to control the situation. Rather than working to remove the Kim dynasty, which judging by its own words and history is unlikely to change, the United States

(and South Korea) bolster their defenses so that if the Kim regime *should* act on its threats of war, the allies can win the war as quickly as possible. As for the North Korean people, they are on their own.

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FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email [fpri@fpri.org](mailto:fpri@fpri.org), or visit us at [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).