

Kim Jong Un's North Korea – What Has Changed?



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Introduction

The situation on the Korean Peninsula evolved rapidly in 2018. The three inter-Korean summits and the North Korea-United States summit were events that we could not have predicted just a few months ago. At the center is Kim Jong Un, chairman of the State Affairs Commission of North Korea. Kim took over the leadership of North Korea at a young age. While North Korea maintains a socialist state, in actuality we can see it being ruled by a dynasty like in feudal times. North Korea has pursued extremely closed policies since its foundation, which has contributed to building up its mysterious image and increasing concerns about its military power under a dictatorship, and this has served as a source of its competitiveness. South Korea's assessment of Kim has changed dramatically. The first South Korean special envoy that visited Pyongyang and came into contact with Kim for the first time stated that "Chairman Kim Jong Un was well-versed not only in the relationship between the North and South, but also with the details of the background and history of international affairs." While this is only natural for a leader who bears responsibility for a country, this assessment of Kim was a clear expression of the outside world's perception of the young and inexperienced leader. The world, as well as some in North Korea, has generally considered Kim an extraordinary dictator who has, since taking power in 2012, threatened the international community with nuclear and missile development and did not hesitate to do away with not only powerful men, but even relatives such as Jang Song Thaek and Kim Jong Nam. In this way Kim's radical conduct significantly increased concerns about the political risks posed by North Korea for South Korea and the rest of the world.

However, since Kim became leader, North Korea has shown many internal changes. The international community did not take much interest in such changes as they were overshadowed by the nuclear problem. Since 2018, Kim has started to show himself to the outside world and assessments of him have changed. China has even called him "a great young leader who will move the world". This article will assess the stability of the North Korean regime based on the changes that have occurred since Kim came to power.

Changes in & Assessment of North Korea

A North Korea that Accepts Risk

Currently, North Korea is accepting risk. While Kim Jong Un used a

strategy of fortification to protect North Korea, Kim Jong Un is employing an active military strategy to defend it. The sanctions against North Korea and the strategy of increasing pressure that the US is employing are improving the stability of the regime. Kim is trying to bring changes to North Korea through denuclearization negotiations. The country is still a feudalistic society, but Kim is trying to change it into a modern one. But paradoxically, maintaining a feudalistic society provides stability for the regime. There are similarities to the times when Western powers demanded East Asian countries that still maintained a feudal society to open up in the 19th century. The frequency with which Kim is providing local guidance while displaying his anger towards unchanging North Korean officials and organizations is increasing. In spite of economic sanctions, he is flaunting the progress of developments such as the Mirae Scientists Street, Ryomyong Avenue, and Wonsan Kalma zone. What Kim is demanding of North Koreans is to have the resolve for change, so that the sanctions would not be a problem.

North Koreans are scrambling to procure the financial resources for various developments. When Kim orders development, the Party allocates financial resources to each organization. Each organization then distributes the allocated resources to North Koreans. Kim checks each site through on-the-spot guidance and pushes development forward. It should be noted that the focus of such movements is on restoring the North Korean economy's self-rehabilitation capacities. The economy's dependence on the outside world is low. It is a typical feudalistic society. The commercialization of North Korea simply means the distribution method for internal resources is switched from a planned economy to a market economy. It is not that the economic pie has got larger and the market has expanded. Kim wants to enlarge the pie. Because the procurement of internal resources has its limits, he is actively trying to obtain external resources.

To this end, North Korea has been negotiating with the US with its only bargaining chip, denuclearization. If the pie becomes larger, North Korea's dependence on the outside world increases and it will become an opportunity for North Korean society to switch from a feudalistic society to a modern one. The market will exceed the change in method of distributing North Korea's internal resources and the nature of the economy itself will be forced to change. This will fundamentally change the method of assessing the stability of the North Korean regime. Kim accepts these risks.

A Change of the Method of Assessing the Stability of the North Korean Regime Is Necessary

The international community's economic sanctions against North Korea have become a means to obstruct its changes. In order to break through the Kim Jong Il era's fortification strategy, the international community employed a carrot-and-stick strategy and it is still clinging to this way. Many people who have visited North Korea see improvement in the economy to the extent that they question whether North Korea has really had sanctions imposed on it. Of course, this is only after seeing some major cities such as Pyongyang, but if the sanctions have any effect they would impact Pyongyang as well. North Koreans are used to using the country's financial resources through the distribution method of the market. North Korea overcame through the market a situation of economic difficulties stemming from dysfunctional distribution in the past. However, by circulating internally goods that should be exported outside the country due to the sanctions, a situation in which there are more goods is occurring. The sanctions are serving to maintain the stability of the feudalistic society.

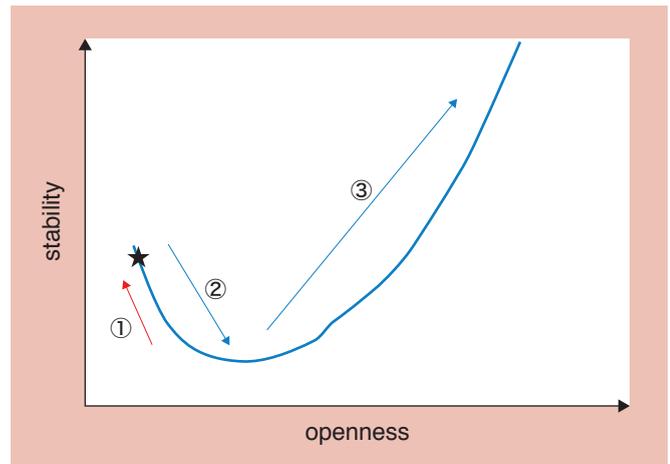
Peace on the Korean Peninsula will start from changes in North Korea. Its menacing behavior towards the world with its nuclear capabilities threatens peace not only on the Korean Peninsula but also in Northeast Asia, as well as globally. This was Kim Jong Il's fortification strategy. As a result of economic sanctions by the rest of the world in order to stop such menacing acts, North Korea raised its level of threat. However, Kim Jong Un switched to an active military strategy for defense. What he is asking for is to become a member of the international community, since he is prepared to stop menacing acts even though possessing nukes. He is trying to increase the North Korean economy's dependence on the outside world.

The US has a toehold on the solution. Both China and Vietnam started to reap the benefits of reform and opening-up since improving their respective relationships with the US. The US is presenting denuclearization as a condition for North Korea to qualify as a member of the international community. Since Kim Jong Un commenced direct negotiations with the US, he has made his intention for denuclearization clear continuously and also stated this intention in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration at the inter-Korean summit last September. North Korea revealed the destruction of the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site and pledged the closing of the Dongchang-ri Missile Engine Test Site. It also stated that the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center could be dismantled. The US has stated that North Korea must first do everything toward complete denuclearization and has not eased up on sanctions. South Korea and other countries such as China and Russia are of the opinion that a certain level of easing sanctions is necessary, but the US shows no sign of backing down. This is forcing North Korea to maintain its feudalistic society and return to Kim Jong Il's fortification strategy that had threatened the international community. From such a viewpoint, we must change how we assess the stability of the North Korean regime going forward.

This situation can be explained by Ian Bremmer's J Curve.

CHART

Correlation of the stability & openness of the North Korean regime in the J Curve



Note: ★ shows the current position of North Korea.
Source: Ian Bremmer, *The J Curve* (2007), Seoul, Veritas

Bremmer states that in the process of reforming and opening socialist and less-developed closed countries, Zone 2 naturally exists. Applying this analysis to North Korea, the situation can be explained as shown in the *Chart*. The era when Kim Jong Il's fortification strategy was employed corresponds to Zone 1. If Kim Jong Il favored the opposite of openness in order to maintain the stability of the regime, Kim Jong Un, who employs an active military strategy for defense, is considering the direction of Zone 3. However, in reality, as negotiations take place between the US and North Korea, the emergence of Zone 2 is inevitable. Therefore, if North Korea-US negotiations are to come into full swing in the future, a method to assess the stability of the North Korean regime that will emerge in Zone 2 will be necessary.

Five Core Indicators

The core indicators that express the level of stability and change in the North Korean regime can be identified in two areas: changes in the internal environment and changes in the external environment. Looking at its internal environment, the North Korean regime has seemed to be a feudal absolute monarchy rather than a socialist regime. Socialism has been used as a means of maintaining such a feudal monarchy. If Kim Il Sung established the North Korean regime and Kim Jong Il consistently protected the regime from internal and external threats through fortification, Kim Jong Un leans heavily toward an active military strategy for defense (defense equipped with offensive weapons). The traditional indicators to assess the North Korean regime were selected during the fortification era of Kim Jong Il and they are not suitable for the changes of the times.

That is to say that the international community considered North Korea to be stable if it maintained its current feudal characteristics and unstable if it switched to a modern society. However, now we should consider it to be the opposite. Kim Jong Un is trying to bring

North Korea out of a feudalistic society and lead it to a modern society. However, this has the risk of increasing instability in the regime. Even with the same assessment indicators, the standards to evaluate differ.

Changes in the internal environment are also being pushed by Kim. For changes in the external environment, the core concerns are likely to be changes in the environment accompanying the power struggle between the US and China and it will signify North Korea becoming a normal state within the international community. However, there is a possibility that North Korea becoming a normal state might conversely increase the instability of the regime.

Overall, Kim is directly taking the lead in pushing forward work that could potentially increase instability in North Korea. It is unclear whether Kim is aware of such an outcome. The question of whether normal development of the North Korean regime is proportional to North Korea's political stability remains unanswered. Some hold the view that if Kim's work that harms the stability of North Korea goes too far, there is a possibility that it will whip up a backlash within North Korea. Nevertheless, because Kim is conducting work that increases instability in North Korea, the method by which we assess the regime's stability must change.

The core indicators to assess the stability of the North Korean regime can be summed up in the following five points.

(1) North Korea's Relationship with the US

North Korea's relationship with the US is the core concern of changes in North Korea's external environment. This changes according to the security of the regime that North Korea demands and the degree of denuclearization that the US demands. Before North Korea's declaration as a nuclear power, the US tended to control North Korea indirectly through China and South Korea. However, it has been controlling the situation through direct dialogue with North Korea since 2018. Since the 1990s, North Korea has been attempting to join the international community in various directions. In 1992 it adopted a basic agreement with South Korea, held high-level talks with Japan on eight occasions, and attempted to normalize relations. However, there was strong opposition, with the US bringing up the allegation of North Korea's nuclear development and its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. With the US considering military action over this, the bilateral relationship cooled rapidly (first nuclear crisis). However, as instability in the North Korean regime rose with the death of Kim Il Sung, the US concluded the Agreed Framework with North Korea in October 1994 to suspend the proliferation of North Korea's nuclear technology. The US was to make arrangements for two 1-million kilowatt light water reactors by 2003 as a condition for North Korea to suspend its nuclear development. We know that at the time, the US made this agreement with North Korea on the premise that the regime would no longer exist in 10 years' time.

However, the North Korean regime continued to exist, and in 2002 the North Korean nuclear crisis was reignited (second nuclear crisis). The Sept. 19, 2005 agreement seemingly put an end to the North

Korean nuclear problem, but the crisis reemerged with North Korea's nuclear experiments and has continued until recently. Kim Jong Un's North Korea declared the completion of its development of nuclear weapons and has resumed negotiations with the US premised on denuclearization. The US abandoned its existing method of indirect involvement and has begun directly communicating with North Korea. The North is demanding security guarantees for its regime from the US. For the US, this demand means halting hostile military actions and lifting economic sanctions. In short, it is a demand to create conditions for North Korea to act as a normal state within the international community. In return, it would go into the nuclear order that the US maintains. Comprehensively, this would signify that North Korea would come under the US nuclear umbrella. If the relationship between North Korea and the US progresses to the point of establishing diplomatic ties, it would bring about tremendous change in the regime. North Korea's international standing would transform from a rogue state to a normal one. On the other hand, the North's national power would virtually be reduced to the lowest level. That is to say that the progression of North Korea-US relations will result in making the North Korean regime less stable.

(2) North Korea's Relationship with China

The relationship between North Korea and China has traditionally been equal. Nevertheless, China is the North's most important supporter. The relationship began to show signs of misalignment with the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and South Korea in the early 1990s. In a situation in which the US and Japan had no diplomatic ties with North Korea, its most trusted supporter China suddenly established diplomatic ties with South Korea without prior consultation with the North. At the time, because the results of the economic reform and opening-up of the Chinese market had yet to be seen, there hadn't been a much economic exchange, but they had maintained a close political relationship. The economic relationship between China and North Korea started to become very close around 2010. Japan started to strengthen sanctions against North Korea in 2006 due to the abduction problem and South Korea cut all ties with the North with the May 24 measures of 2010. It was around this time that China's economy expanded dramatically and North Korea naturally started to depend on China.

Currently, North Korea's relationship with China accounts for over 90% of its external economic relations. It is an absolute relationship of dependency. This means that if North Korea remains content under the protection of China, there is no particular problem in maintaining the regime's stability. In order to maintain the North's feudalistic system, it is actually more beneficial to maintain its dependency on China. However, if the international community's sanctions against the North were to be eased and its external relationships become diversified, the North Korea-China relationship would be less close. This will possibly result in increased changes and instability in North Korean society. On the surface, if the relationship between the North and China were to deteriorate, it is possible that the outcome would be the same – the assessment that

instability in the regime would heighten – but in actuality it would not deteriorate, but rather its dependence on China would decrease. North Korea would be able to employ a survival strategy of equidistant diplomacy with the US and China. China would continue to provide the proverbial carrot to North Korea to maintain its influence, and the US would likely present a different carrot to the North to distance it from China. North Korea is trying to take advantage of such a conciliatory game. The less close its relationship with China gets, the more the regime's stability will decline.

(3) Kim Jong Un's Leadership

North Korea has a socialist constitution. The system of this constitution means that North Korea takes the form of a republic. However, it is actually in the form of a monarchical state. It is a feudalistic monarchy in which the king has absolute authority. Kim's authority surpasses the constitution. In such a system, challenges to the absolute authority cannot be accepted. Kim Jong Il was seen as the favorite to succeed Kim Il Sung in the 1960s. After more than 10 years in a power struggle with his stepmother Kim Song Ae's faction, he was officially named successor in 1980. In the end, it can be said that he fought for the position of successor with his stepbrother Kim Pyong Il. Kim Jong Un also fought for power until the mid-2000s with his stepbrother Kim Jong Nam. However, due to the sudden death of Kim Jong Il, he took power without being able to end the power struggle himself. It ended up creating a situation in which kingmaker Jang Song Thaek aimed to become regent. Kim Jong Un brutally disposed of Jang Song Thaek who challenged the absolute authority, and is maintaining a regime of terror worse than that of Kim Jong Il.

The change in Kim Jong Un's leadership is the most important barometer of change in North Korean society. Within the characteristic of a feudalistic monarchy (hereditary monarchy) led by Kim, we must focus on the process of divine right (the power of the king) being separated from political power (republican form) through the process of modernization. The reason for this is because the changes in North Korea being advanced by Kim, in other words processes to be a normal state, can only trigger separation of the king's power and political power. The emergence of political power based on a constitution is the basis of political modernization. It is unclear whether Kim is aware of this. Nevertheless, we must assess the stability of the regime from the perspective that it is inversely proportional to the weakening of Kim's power.

(4) Movement of North Korea's Military

North Korea's military is currently completely under the yoke of Kim and the Workers Party. It is believed that there was a *coup d'état* in North Korea by the new military guards led by Jang Song Thaek in the summer of 2008 when Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke. They were gradually purged before the execution of Jang Song Thaek and with the purge the military reverted to being the military of Kim and the Party. It was Choe Ryong-Hae who orchestrated this. During the military-first politics of Kim Jong Il, the North Korean military had

numerous vested rights, but Kim Jong Un diverted the military's vested rights to the living of the people. It is not too much to say that the North Korean military currently only has the rights necessary to maintain it. Because the market to sell military goods is cut off internationally, simply put, the military has become extremely poor. Up to now, the military had enjoyed privileges to be able to maintain a separate economic power called the second economic category. Since Kim came to power, the military has lost most of its privileges and its dissatisfaction is growing. Furthermore, Kim is attempting to curtail the enlarged military. Recently, due to a military agreement between South Korea and North Korea, the military's position is further declining.

Such movements have the possibility of aggravating the military's concern about Kim's political power and the possibility to attempt a change in political power (*a coup d'état*) cannot be ruled out. This is due to the military no longer being able to maintain itself on a state-level distribution of resources alone and being forced to explore an independent means of survival. There is a possibility that the economic activities of the military will expand along with changes in the external environment. This will lead to the military expanding its independent power, increasing the relative possibility of independence of political power. Additionally, in the process of transitioning to a republican form through a constitution, not only is there a possibility of the military's political neutrality or independence emerging, it could also be an opportunity for the military's traditional force to enhance itself. Therefore, the independence of the military will be inversely proportional to the stability of the North Korean regime.

(5) Trends in North Koreans' Lives

Public sentiment is divine will. Of the core indicators that affect the stability of North Korea, the trends in North Koreans' lives should always be included. North Korea maintains a planned socialist economy, but this virtually fell apart during the famine of the 1990s. North Koreans were used to daily necessities being provided at low prices and usage expenses, residence expenses, and education expenses of social overhead capital. They simply had to provide labor. However, at the same time as the planned economic system failed, North Koreans were forced to resolve their living problems on their own. Their solution was the market. In the early stages, the market expanded as a barter system. Gradually, currency became involved and in order to maintain the stability of the value of the currency, it was replaced by foreign currency (US dollar, Chinese yuan, etc.). The biggest interest of North Koreans was how to earn more. As long as they had money, they wouldn't have a problem finding food and they could even use electricity. They could become the proprietor of a company and they could place their children in good schools. They could even make opportunities to go abroad.

The North Korean authorities have repeatedly gone back and forth from allowing the spread of the market to a limited extent to suppressing it. However, since Kim came to power, the market has been officially recognized. Each company earns its own money and

laborers who work for each company are responsible for their own living. Cooperative farms have also been given back the right to dispose of the goods they produce themselves. Cooperative farms existed only in name and since 1979 farmers had been pushed to become laborers, receiving monthly cost-of-living allowances in effect. Naturally, the decline in productivity of cooperative farms could not be avoided and farmers concentrated on cultivating vegetable gardens and terraced fields in which they could produce the goods that belonged to them. As the situation worsened during the North Korean famine, the dramatic decline in the productivity of farms was inevitable. Now, cooperative ownership is permitted in effect. Farmers are devoting themselves to cooperative farms. This is because they are allowed to take home the fruits of their labor. The goods produced by companies and on farms are traded in the market. Sole proprietorships are also increasing.

However, because the current situation is mainly commercialization utilizing national resources, its expansion is limited. North Korea shifted from a planned economy to a market economy, but the living of North Koreans remains poor. This is because the economy is not growing with the inflow of new funding. It is simply a reconstruction of part of the hardware broken in the past and changed to a form of distributing it in the market. The work that Kim is pushing to change North Korea from inside will provide opportunities for the economy to grow through the inflow of new foreign resources. A change will occur in the negative accumulation method, which will bring about change in North Korean society. A substantial modernization process will be realized in the lives of North Koreans. With the expansion of mobile phone usage, enhancement of a commercial system, expansion of business sizes, and the birth of an affluent demographic, among other things, North Korea is bound to form a new social network which will, in turn, be the driving force to change society. If the lives of North Koreans improve, the stability of the regime will weaken.

Conclusion

The stability of the North Korean regime is rooted in the continued maintenance of a feudalistic monarchy. If the feudalistic absolute monarchy collapses or changes, during that process the regime will become unstable. Kim is advancing the reform and opening of North Korea through his own absolute power. He is taking action that conflicts with the stability of the regime. From such a viewpoint, the international community's blockade of North Korea is actually preserving the stability of the North as it is a factor that suppresses Kim's efforts for reform and openness.

Opening a way for change begins with North Korea-US relations. Improvement in the relationship with the US will provide the environment for North Korea to transform from a special state to a normal state. Unlike past US administrations, the administration of President Donald Trump is prepared to offer such an environment. If it could not speed up such an offer due to the midterm elections, the Trump administration can concentrate on and accelerate dealings

with North Korea now. If bilateral relations remain at the same level, the North Korean regime will be unable to change and it will maintain its stability. Because its dependence on China will increase, its stability will also improve. Kim's leadership forces change without being able to provide new things so it will reach its limit, but since there is no driving force to change the political regime it will remain stable. The military will also be forced to remain the military of the Head of State and the Party. The commercialization of North Koreans will likely expand, but since a substantive expansion cannot be expected the market will not have the power to bring about even more change or instability. Therefore, if North Korea-US relations remain at the same level, the regime's stability will increase.

On the other hand, should bilateral relations develop, North Korea will become a normal state, and at the same time its international standing will fall. That means it will actually weaken the stability of North Korea. There is a possibility that after North Korea's weakening continues until it enters into a stage of full-blown economic development, it will gradually strengthen its national power. This would be the so-called J Curve effect. Its dependence on China will decrease and the stability of the regime will also weaken. Kim's leadership will strengthen in the early stages, but it will likely gradually decline. If his leadership strengthens, North Korea will be stable, but if his leadership weakens, it will become unstable. There is a possibility that the independence of the military will gradually increase. The military is negative about the regime's stability. North Koreans' lives will improve and this will also affect the regime as a destabilizer. Such a process will repeat itself over the next few years and assessments of the North Korean regime will also change repeatedly. At present, the regime is stable. This is because it has yet to ride the waves of change.

Kim wants to negotiate with the US using denuclearization as leverage to create a new North Korea. He is pushing forward changes in spite of the fact that they will make the regime less stable. Therefore, we must aid Kim. Currently, he is the only person who can change North Korea and it is not an exaggeration to say that if he cannot do it, there is no other way. The surrounding countries can help him to escape from isolation. It is not even necessary to overestimate him. However, doubting and restraining the only alternative could hinder progress. Kim is appealing to us to believe in him now. To hastily pressure North Korea now to come forward with both hands in the air will only aggravate the situation. The higher the hurdle the international community sets that Kim cannot accept, the lower the possibility for a resolution. Kim is young and patient. If we do not act now, it will only serve to allow North Korea to improve its nuclear weapons and raise the level of threat against the international community. There is also the possibility that South Korean President Moon Jae In will fret about the situation and leave it up to the next administration.

J.S

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