AN ISOLATED ANACHRONISM: NORTH KOREA

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In 1945 Korea was liberated from the Japanese Empire after 35 years of colonization. Newly freed Koreans wanted to establish a modern republic, but Cold War politics dictated a cruel division of the Korean peninsula. In August 1948 the Republic of Korea, commonly known as South Korea, was established with the support of the United States, and less than a month later in September 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, commonly known as North Korea, was formed under the sponsorship of the Soviet Union. The two Koreas went their separate ways except for the period from 1950 to 1953, when North Korea attempted to unify the country by force in what we know as the Korean War. The North Koreans call it the "Great Fatherland Liberation War," claiming they were trying to "free" the South Korean people from American domination.

Division presented both Koreas with social, economic, and political challenges—many of which they still face today. More than 10 million Korean families were divided, including my own extended family. Before division, the northern half of the peninsula with its mountains, rivers, and mineral deposits, was the more industrialized, whereas the warmer southern region provided the bulk of Korea's rice harvest. After the Korean War, both Koreas had to start life over, with millions of homeless and hungry people feeling that they had been marked for suffering. The political division of the peninsula created bitter animosity and mistrust, which continues to this day.

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During the first decade after division, the North's economy grew more quickly than the South's, but this early economic advantage did not last long. By the 1960s the world's liberal capitalist economies were out-producing the communist economies, and North Korea was stuck on the wrong side of history. In the absence of private enterprise, communist slogans were unable to provide adequate motivation. By the 1980s, North Korea had fallen far behind South Korea in terms of both economic output and living standards.

Other communist societies gradually converted their economies and began to catch up with the West. North Korea was one of the few countries that failed to adapt to the global economy. Left behind, it became isolated and anachronistic. The principal explanation for this aversion to change is the the ruling Kim family. North Korea is essentially the private property of a single family, which is now ruling in its third generation. In order to keep control of their people and prevent them from comparing themselves to more prosperous Koreans in the South, the Kims have enforced a drastic form of isolation. So North Korea today is not only left out of the international community, it is largely out of modern history. One of the most common statements foreigners make after visiting North Korea is that it was like taking a trip back in time.

Hereditary Leadership

The First Kim: Creation of a God-King

Since the birth of North Korea as a separate state, three members of the Kim family have firmly held the reins of power. The first was Kim Il-sung, whom the people called "Great Leader" or "Great Leader Father." Kim was born on April 15, 1912, and spent much of his youth in Manchuria while the Japanese ruled Korea. In 1932 he joined like-minded comrades to fight Japanese troops in China, making occasional raids into Korea. In 1941 Kim and his comrades were forced to flee into Russia. There he married and had a son, Kim Jong-il, who was born at an army camp near Khabarovsk on February 16, 1942.

All North Korean publications, including schoolbooks, depict Kim as a military genius who defeated the Japanese and brought independence to Korea—an assertion that is demonstrably false. True, he was one of many brave Korean guerilla fighters eager for Korea to regain its independence from Japan. He also possessed a keen skill to assess his political environment, and he was lucky not to be killed by the Japanese. Most important, he was in the right place at the right time: a capable Korean soldier in a Russian army camp when the Russians needed a Korean puppet leader to rule over the northern half of the Korean peninsula.

After Korea was liberated by American and Russian forces on August 15, 1945, the Russians transported Kim, who had been commissioned a captain in the Soviet Army,

to his homeland—a month *after* liberation day. As a matter of fact, Kim Il-sung was not even his real name, but rather the name of a legendary Korean guerrilla fighter. When Kim returned to Korea, he was only 33 years old, and people were puzzled about how this young man could be the great legendary fighter. Therefore, his first challenge was to create for himself an image as a great hero who liberated the Korean peninsula. His second challenge was to eliminate political competitors associated with South Korean, Chinese, and his own Russian factions of resistance fighters.

Kim Il-sung was gregarious and charismatic. He embraced people from all walks of life, although behind this jovial façade he was a merciless and brutal leader who left a long list of purged political competitors in his wake and established a string of harsh concentration camps. To keep his country free from foreign interference, including from the Russians, he adopted a national slogan called *Juche* [self-dependence]. Under the banner of *Juche* he persecuted those he suspected of being disloyal to him, claiming that they were foreign agents. His propagandists spread the idea that the Korean nation was like a living human being, and its leader was the brain that controlled the body. The Korean people were taught to do whatever Kim told them to do.

Thanks to North Korea's isolation from outside news, Kim succeeded in becoming a god-like figure to his people. However, he failed to deliver on his perennial promise that his people would "eat white rice with meat soup, wear silk clothes, and live in tiled-roof houses." Koreans love to eat steaming white rice as the main staple. Accompanied by meat soup and Korea's famous *kimchi* (pickled cabbage), this food was the definition of the good life for the common people. Instead, they were forced to eat coarser grains such as corn, meat (usually fatty pork) only once or twice a year, wear drab and uncomfortable vinylon clothing (made from coal and limestone), and exchange their old thatched-roof houses for small apartments. Life was better than it had been immediately after the Korean War, but hardly the "paradise on earth" that the North Korean press boasted of.

In his final years, Kim Il-sung sank into portly retirement, leaving the job of running the country's domestic affairs to his first son. After the elder Kim died of a heart attack in 1994, he was named "eternal president" and his son (and later grandson) ruled under different titles so as not to eclipse the reputation of the senior Kim. To this day the North Korean media refer to their country as "Kim Il-sung's Korea," with no irony.

The Second Kim: The Weird One

How does a communist dictator choose his successor? Kings and queens choose one of their children, usually the first born, but this practice is frowned upon among communists. North Korea, however, has always been more of a kingdom than a communist country, so there never seems to have been a serious question that the crown would go to a family member.

Kim Jong-il, the father's oldest son, was chosen as the successor sometime in the 1970s. In contrast to his father, who was an extrovert, Kim Jong-il was publicly shy. In his entire public life he made only one recorded speech, which consisted in its entirety of the words, "Glory to the heroic Korean People's Army."

Kim Jong-il's first challenge was to consolidate his power base after his father died unexpectedly. The timing was not auspicious. In the early 1990s North Korea's principal economic supporters in Eastern Europe and China discontinued most of their aid to North Korea, creating a shock to its so-called *Juche* economy. Severe floods devastated the country in 1995. Politically, global communism was on the ropes, with one dictator after another being replaced. North Korea's government-run economy went bust and the new leader went into three years of "mourning," leaving the people to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, the dynamic South Korean economy was booming.

As a consequence of economic shocks and leadership failure, a famine swept through the land from 1994-1997. How many people died has never been determined (in North Korea statistics are considered to be state secrets), but estimates range from a half million to 3 million people, out of a population at that time of about 22 million. This proved to be an unforgettable lesson for the North Korean people.

How was the younger Kim to survive in this adverse political and economic environment? All he seemed to have going for him was the fact that he had been appointed by his god-like father. To be sure, he made the most of this advantage. His propagandists constantly reminded the people that if they respected the father, they must respect the son. With political purges that he engineered to keep the elites in line, and by rewarding the military brass by instituting a national "military-first" policy, Kim survived his early days and was begrudgingly accepted by the North Korean people, who in any case had no say in the matter of who ruled them.

Kim's second challenge was to keep his more powerful neighbors at bay while his country struggled with its problems. In the West, North Korea watchers (myself included) waited for the country to collapse like other communist countries. They talked about "winds of change" blowing into the Korean peninsula. Kim's Chinese neighbors were not hostile, nor were they happy that Kim did not institute the same kind of economic reforms that were rescuing other communist economies.

In international affairs, Kim had one strong card: a nuclear weapons program that had been in development since the mid-1980s. In negotiations with the Clinton White House, North Korea was able to reach an "Agreed Framework" just after Kim took over from his father. The Agreement provided North Korea with economic aid from South Korea and the United States in return for halting its nuclear weapons program.

Equally important was the political recognition Kim Jong-il's regime received from its most hostile critic, the United States. When this agreement broke down, a series of Six Party Talks were initiated in 2003 with the same purpose, and in these talks, which were convened off and on for five years, North Korea sat down as an equal with the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and South Korea. Kim may not have been taken

seriously by his people, but he found an acceptable place in the international community.

The Third Kim: Tiger Father, Dog Son, Tiger Cub Grandson

Kim Jong-il's health began to fail in his late 60s, and almost overnight the formerly portly dictator became a thin, hobbling old man. Before he died, at the age of 70, apparently of a stroke, he hurriedly appointed one of his sons to succeed him. He had at least three sons to choose from, from various wives and mistresses. The oldest, from his first mistress, was a playboy who left the country in his early 20s to live the good life in China, Macao and other East Asian countries. The second son was reportedly too soft to be considered for the job of strongman dictator. Kim Jong-un was the youngest among the three, but his father obviously saw good potential in this third son, who was famous for his hot temper and aggressive personality. The Kim family loved basketball games and when the third son lost a game to his elder brother, he cried and demanded a replay.

In Korea, there is an old saying that no wealth lasts three generations unless the third generation is an economic genius. Kim Jong-un is the third generation of Kims to run the country, and though he may not be a political genius, he has a knack for dictatorial leadership. His first challenge was his youth and inexperience. Before he was appointed by his father, no one inside or outside North Korea even knew what he looked like. In a country where there is no law of the land, it can be tough for a leader in his late 20s to dominate generals who are mostly in their 60s and 70s. The young Kim immediately took a hard line, demoting and purging most of the top generals before they had time to move against him. He tried hard to project the same image as his illustrious grandfather, imitating him in leadership style and speech.

Fortunately for Kim Jong-un, North Korea's economic situation was considerably better than it was when his father took power in 1994. This improvement was due entirely to the fact that after the great famine people decided not to trust the government and instead started their own businesses. These businesses were (and are) technically illegal, but Kim Jong-un decided not to seriously interfere with them as long as the people were able to make a living and not threaten his rule. Not only the common people but also government officials and military officers got in on this illegal capitalism, giving them a stake in the new Kim regime.

The real challenge for the third Kim has been the influx of information from the outside world, mostly coming from South Korea and China. With such information, the North Korean people can see how much better economic conditions are in other countries. Traditionally, information has been totally monopolized and controlled by the regime, which depicts Kim as the savior of the people. As North Koreans began to flee the country during the famine, new lines of communication opened up. Defectors living in China and South Korea now send information back to their families and

friends. Chinese and North Korean traders bring in all sorts of information. Foreign radio broadcasts and smuggled flash drives deliver news and entertainment, especially South Korean movies and soap operas. By now almost everyone in North Korea, even in the countryside, knows something about the outside world, although so far this information has not had any political impact because the Kim regime has developed very robust security measures to keep the people in line.

Looking at the success his father had with North Korea's nuclear program, Kim Jong-un has accelerated that program, along with North Korea's ballistic missile program. This strategy is a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it forces other countries to take Kim and his country seriously. On the other hand, it provides these countries with a reason to threaten North Korea.

The third generation Kim is perhaps the boldest of the three Kims. Whether this boldness comes from astute calculation or youthful hubris is hard to say. For now, Kim seems to be securely in charge. He has purged many military officers and government officials. Dictators in other countries, and his father and grandfather, lived long lives by keeping everyone in fear. This may work also for Kim, especially if he is able to patch up relations with China and make deals with his erstwhile enemies, South Korea and the United States.

The Country

Politics: The Party of the Leader

Not surprisingly, when Kim Il-sung was consolidating control, he adopted the political system of his Russian mentors, the only difference being that he made the leadership a hereditary position. It would not be wrong to say that there is no politics in North Korea, at least as it is known in Western democracies. Like other communist countries, North Korea allows only one party, the Workers' Party of Korea. A few other parties exist, but in name only. Within the Party, there may be hidden or unofficial factions, but anyone who is not totally loyal to the leader lives in danger of being purged.

The Party is an extension of the leader. Since the Party commands both the government and the military, the leader of the Party, who is always a Kim, holds the highest position in the land. The official head of government is the Premier, who merely performs ceremonial functions. The Party not only controls all top positions in the country, but also places its officials (and spies) at the lowest levels of society, down to the neighborhood watch official in civilian life and the political officer at the lowest levels of the army.

Economy: Ruined by Politics

After a quick start, the North Korean economy slowed. Mass mobilization and Party command were sufficient to direct a simple economy but not to run a complex economy. All orders continued to come from the leader, who had no training in economics. As the economy stagnated in the 1970s and 1980s, Kim Il-sung reportedly asked his economic cadres what the problem was. Nobody dared tell him the truth—that he was the problem—but they knew that the economy was doomed to run in a vicious downward cycle. Factories cannot operate efficiently because there is no fuel to run the machinery. No fuel because there is no money buy foreign fuel. No money because there are no quality goods to export to make money. And so back to square one.

The only thing that kept the economy from collapsing was barter trade and aid from North Korea's communist neighbors in China and Eastern Europe. After 1990, this assistance disappeared and the true state of North Korea's economy became apparent, resulting in the famine of the late 1990s.

The North Korean economy can be viewed in three parts. The national economy went bankrupt in the 1980s and is still in poor shape. Not only is it mismanaged, but it is burdened by having to support one of the world's largest armies. This dual-track policy, currently going under the name of the *Byungjin* (parallel development) policy, is the leader's idea.

As the national economy has shrunk, the military has developed its own separate economy to pay the salaries of officers and buy advanced weapons, although except for showpiece weapons such as missiles, military equipment is obsolete and often in poor repair. Enlisted soldiers are hungry and disgruntled. In the 1990s the military got into private enterprise, earning money by establishing businesses and trading companies. For example, the national airline is run by the military.

Finally, there exists a hidden court economy that provides for the leader, who needs money to reward his supporters and finance his luxurious lifestyle, with his numerous villas and resorts equipped with luxury cars, horses, yachts, and the latest electronic goods. The military and court economies are currently under United Nations sanctions but that doesn't stop them from operating.

At the root of North Korea's economic problems is a deficient energy supply, which is ironic given that the northern part of the Korean peninsula is blessed with rivers and minerals. All fuel oil must be imported from China. The North's coal reserves are of relatively low grade, and mostly exported to China. Hydroelectric dams are not sufficient to provide all the necessary energy, and during droughts the power supply is especially critical. Much of the electrical grid was built by the Japanese in the first half of the twentieth century. When power goes out in the so-called luxury high-rise apartments in Pyongyang, people cannot use the elevators, toilets, or lights. Understandably, the most desirable apartments are on the lower floors. Foreigners who stay in one

of Pyongyang's two high-rise foreigner's hotels must ask the front desk when hot water will be available during the day.

With little of value to export, North Korea is chronically short of foreign currency (hard cash). The official exchange rate for the North Korean "won" is a bit above 100 won to the dollar, but the black market rate is around 8,000 won to the dollar. In an attempt to remedy the situation, the government has opened numerous "foreign trade zones" which foreign companies hesitate to invest in for a variety of excellent reasons, including widespread corruption and poor physical infrastructure. What happens is that either an investment loses money from the outset, or if it becomes profitable, the government unilaterally rewrites the contract to extract more money for itself. Foreign companies generally discover that they are better off investing in other low-wage developing countries in Southeast and South Asia.

Since the collapse of the national economy in the 1990s, the people have had to find ways to survive. In 1984, Kim Jong-il, still apprenticing for his father, got the idea while on an inspection trip that local industries could be established using local materials to manufacture simple goods to be sold in special government stores, thereby taking pressure off the central government. His visit was made on August 3, and these locally made goods came to be called August 3 (8-3) goods. After the collapse of the national economy, people made these goods for their own little businesses and left the government out of the loop.

Hundreds of markets, some sanctioned by the government and many not, have sprung up throughout the country. People make home-made goods, or trade goods from their town with another town, and keep the money themselves, except for the bribes necessary to pay government officials to allow them to engage in this anti-socialist business activity. Farmers who grow corn make liquor instead of selling the corn at the government price. A family might raise a pig, even on the veranda of their apartment, and sell the meat in a local market. Residents of towns along the Chinese border buy smuggled Chinese goods and transport them to towns far from the border. Fishermen take out their boats on their own time and sell their catch at the markets. This private business is what keeps the North Korean people alive, and it has overtaken the national economy. Even large projects—in sectors like construction and mining—are often financed by individuals who sign (illegal) contracts with the managers of government-run businesses.

The markets have always been viewed with suspicion by the Kim regime. They provide a place for people to freely meet and exchange information and ideas. Products are sold at market rather than government prices. The regime has attempted at times to curtail and even shut down these markets, but that has proved impossible. The police and other government officials who patrol the markets need the bribes they exact to live on, since their official salaries are almost worthless. If a North Korean wants to purchase something that is imported (as 90 percent of goods are), the prevailing government wage

of 5,000 to 50,000 won per month is equivalent to one to ten dollars in purchasing power.

Everywhere, and for everything, it is necessary to bribe officials, who cannot live on their government salaries. Bribery is a blight on society, but also the lifeline of the North Korean economy. Although corruption is recognized as a way of life, for North Koreans who want to deal with foreigners or who are able to defect to South Korea, corruption is a liability. In a sense, the culture of corruption starts with the Kim family, which is wealthy because it exacts bribes from the entire country to finance its lifestyle. As the old Korean saying goes, "When the upper river is polluted, the lower river is polluted as well."

Society: People on Their Own

The capital city of Pyongyang is North Korea's face to the world. The leaders—especially the younger Kims—have gone to great trouble to make it look like an ideal city, with high-rise buildings, parks, wide streets, and of course plenty of well-lighted monuments to the Kim family. Foreign tourists and visitors cannot freely travel to other cities, but defectors, most of whom come from provinces near the Chinese border, have reported on the widening gap between life in the capital and in their poverty-stricken towns.

In general, the gap between North Korea's wealthy class (mostly officials who live in Pyongyang) and the other 22 million North Koreans has been growing as well, which is an irony in a country that continues to profess its faith in socialism. The rich live in luxury apartments (not technically their own), drive expensive cars (not their own), eat at restaurants that accept only foreign currency, and buy foreign luxury goods. They hire servants to work for them, although this is also illegal. The poor still work hard to put simple food on their table, and suffer from illnesses that common drugs and medical treatments would cure, if they were available.

Money has become the new status symbol in North Korean society, replacing Party membership and education. Money can buy anything, including protection from the police for living an illegal lifestyle. The traditional policy of punishment for an entire family because of the actions of a single individual is still in force, but bribes can usually protect the wealthy even from this liability. Until recent years North Koreans who defected across the border into China could expect that the family they left behind would be punished. Now local authorities hold the family hostage in order to extract the foreign currency from them that their escaped family member sends back into the country.

Defectors also send back information from the outside world. Radios with foreign tuners enable people to listen (illegally) to South Korean radio programs broadcast by defectors as well as to programs from foreign stations, including Voice of America and Radio Free Asia. The defectors also launch huge balloons that drift over parts of North

Korea and drop packages with information and gifts. The North Korean authorities punish people who pick up these packages, and then take the goods back to the local police station to enjoy for themselves.

Most North Koreans who defect (over 30,000 so far) are poor but ambitious peasants living near the Chinese border. A few privileged officials from Pyongyang have also chosen to defect. In 2016, the number two man in North Korea's London embassy escaped. His two sons, who were with him in London, didn't want to return to their country. But he is still an exception. It is estimated that at least 50,000 North Koreans work outside their country, mostly doing manual labor in Russia and the Middle East. They are held like prisoners by North Korean security officials. They don't defect because of fear that their family members back home will be punished. And because everything in life is relative, they know that when they return home they will bring back enough money and foreign goods to make their family's life better than their neighbors, even though the government takes about 90 percent of their wages as taxes and bribes.

Among the North Korean people, respect toward the ruling Kim family has waned. People's sentiment toward the third Kim is especially negative. In a traditional society where seniority and experience are respected, the young Kim lords it over his seniors. In 2013 the young Kim executed his uncle, who had been appointed by Kim Jong-il as one of his son's guardians. In 2017 Kim had his older brother assassinated. So far, the young cub's reign of terror has kept him in power, defying the old traditions of Korean society.

Future Prospects

When the world thinks about North Korea it pictures a closed country with nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, cyber-criminals, and serious human rights abuses. International sanctions have isolated the country even more than it has isolated itself; even humanitarian organizations have cut back on their aid programs. China, which is North Korea's principal economic and political supporter, is becoming hostile. South Korea, Japan, and the United States have all expressed their intense frustration with the Kim regime, and the United States has called on other countries to sever diplomatic relations with North Korea. The immediate future does not look good for Kim. But then again, it didn't look good for his father either, and he ruled for 17 years and died a natural death.

The most favorable scenario for Kim Jong-un would see him keeping control of society and making a deal with the United States to keep what nuclear weapons he now has, while freezing nuclear weapons development. If he were to gain international acceptance and aid, Kim could probably keep the generals and top civilian officials on his side. The common people would have no say in the matter and would continue for years to live under his thumb.

In a less favorable scenario, Kim's recalcitrance in the face of international criticism would finally persuade China to join the international community in imposing draconian sanctions—starting with the closing of the border with North Korea. As the North Korean economy is strangled, Kim's domestic supporters might decide it was time for a leadership change, and Kim would have to flee to China, suffering the same fate as many Eastern European communist dictators.

In the least favorable scenario, the United States would decide to take military action against North Korea in response to its many explicit threats, and an ensuing conflict would end the Kim regime and result in the deaths of millions of North and South Koreans.

For Koreans who have suffered from the division of their country, none of these scenarios is desirable. The best hope is for far-reaching internal transformations to begin in North Korea. As information seeps into the country and enlightens its people, they will become more difficult to rule, and when a significant number of the elites become convinced that it is time for a change, Kim will be deposed and the Kim family dynasty will come to an end. Soon thereafter, the time will be ripe for the two Koreas to reunite, opening a new but still difficult chapter of Korean history.

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