



universität  
wien

East Asian Economy and Society



**Vienna Working Papers on  
East Asian Economy and Society**

edited by Rudiger Frank

Volume 2, No. 1, 2009

**Sŏn'gun:  
On the Past and Present of North Korea's  
'Military First' Policy**

by  
Karoly Fendler

# Sŏn'gun: On the Past and Present of North Korea's 'Military First' Policy

by  
Karoly Fendler

**please quote as:**

Fendler, Karoly (2009): Sŏn'gun: on the Past and Present of North Korea's 'Military First' Policy, *Vienna Working Papers on East Asian Economy and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2009

**published by:**

University of Vienna  
East Asian Institute, Chair of East Asian Economy and Society  
Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2.3  
1090 Vienna  
- Austria -

© Fendler, 2009

## About the author

**Karoly FENDLER** (pen name Peter FALUDI), born 1933, received his diploma in oriental history (specialization on Korean history) from Moscow Lomonosow State University in 1958. Before graduating he spent one year at Kim Il-sung University in Pyongyang. From 1958 to 1989 he worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spending eight years at the Hungarian Embassy in Pyongyang. In 1977 he received a doctor's degree in Political Science. From 1984 to 1987 he was head of the Far East Division at the Institute of International Affairs in Budapest. Since 1989 he co-organizes the Korean Section at the College for Foreign Trade in Budapest, where he is also lecturing on Korean history and economy. Since 1998 he is lecturer at the Far East Department at Loránd-Eötvös University Budapest. Dr. Fendler is member of AKSE (Association for Korean Studies in Europe) and researcher at the National Institute of Korean History, Seoul. He can be reached at [kfendler@t-online.hu](mailto:kfendler@t-online.hu).

## Content

Acknowledgment .....	5
Introduction.....	5
One Nation – Two Policies .....	6
Si vi pacem... ..	9
“Socialist Monarchy” and... ..	9
How to go on? Monarchic Dictatorship? .....	14
Conclusion? .....	14
Bibliography.....	16

## Acknowledgment

The author would like to express his gratitude to Dr. Jurij V. Vanin, the former head of the Korean-Mongolian section of the Oriental Institute at the Russian Academy of Science (RAN), and to Dr. Ivan Harsanyi, professor emeritus at the University at Pecs, Hungary. Dr. Lukas Pokorny, University of Vienna, provided great help in editing the paper.

## Introduction

This article was written in fall 2008. As it is emphasized in the conclusion, unforeseen developments and unexpected turns are always possible when it comes to North Korean politics. E. g. since 2008 October 18th the Rodong Sinmun didn't publish anything on sŏn'gun 先軍 for about three weeks. Interestingly, this period of time coincided with rumours about the health status of Kim Jong-il (and with the presidential elections in the United States). Even though the process of Inter-Korean relations passed through major difficulties during that time, in November Rodong Sinmun highlighted the "patriotic" character of the sŏn'gun policy of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), its significance regarding Korea's reunification and the realization of North-South Summits' declarations.

It seems that "conservative forces"<sup>1</sup> in Pyongyang grew stronger these days. Up to now they are still able to solve North Korea's fundamental economic problems. However, the gap between the leadership's (or elite's) policy or propaganda, and society is deepening. Consequently

the regime is gradually losing its social basis. Yet Rodong Sinmun justifies these developments in an article from 2008 November 22nd with severe criticism of the "imperialist reform" and "opening policy" (by the way, reform and opening were the credo of Dèng Xiǎopíng's [1904-1997] policy in China!).

The countries known as "small tigers" or "small dragons" and their latest successors are crucial factors for today's international economic and political life. In the beginning they basically included Asian countries, which were able to tremendously improve their state of underdevelopment within a comparatively short period of time (from a historical point of view), and of course under quite different (geo-)political and economic circumstances. Finally they got into the forefront of highly developed states or at least approached this status. However, we (can) find some common traits concerning the progress of these countries, which started after 1945. Fast economic and partly also social transformation or the "fighting against backwardness" generally took place either in a bloody and violent way or in a softer, more velvet-type context. The division of the Korean Peninsula after 1945 and the subsequent development of the two Korean states – the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – are suitable for a comparison and an evaluation of the different types of dictatorial systems and their actual outcomes. The whole endeavour could be really useful since the political systems formed in the South and the North were strongly dictatorial, acting always in the shadow of great powers under their consent/support. Reason for that were on the one hand the given separate statehood as well as the inner need for stabilizing the political system. On the other hand it was the forced division of the Korean Peninsula, their opposition

<sup>1</sup> Frank, Rüdiger (2008a): North Korea: Domestic Politics and Economy, in: Frank, Rüdiger, Jim Hoare, Patrick Köllner and Susan Pares (eds.): Korea 2008: Politics, Economy, and Society, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2009, pp. 27-44

originating from the situation of the Cold War, and the aftermath of the Korean War.

### One Nation – Two Policies

As far as South Korea is concerned, we have to recognize that Park Chung-hee's (1917-1979) military and later "civil" dictatorship was of enormous success because it had – under the given circumstances and within a historically short period of time – an advantageous impact on the economic and social development as well as on the stabilization of the internal and foreign political situation of the country. What gives Park Chung-hee a historical importance is the fact that he has used his power which was consolidated through political, economic, technical and military support given by the US and Japan to dramatically improve South Korea's economy.

Within the framework of the five year plans he successfully realized the economic modernization of the previously extremely undeveloped country. In spite of the earlier criticism, Park is more and more referred to as "the father of the South Korean economic miracle". Today the Republic of Korea is the 11th strongest economic power in the world.

Comparing the above mentioned facts to North Korea (the other part of a nation that had been homogeneous for the previous 1300 years) it seems inexplicable that despite the first success (till approx. 1964-1965) the DPRK was incapable of achieving similar results. That was the case even though its economic conditions were much better in terms of natural resources.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> North Korea's backwardness cannot be attributed solely to the Soviet and Eastern-Central European

The DPRK not just continued to be the "black sheep" of the Korean Peninsula and the whole Far East but also of international politics since it remained in a stranglehold of repetitive decade-long economic and supply crises. Not by chance foreign analysts accuse the political system of the country (which can hardly be called socialist) and its extreme personal or clan cult of dictatorship for these hardships.

In the DPRK there has been military and administrative dictatorship for more than half a century. Reasons for that – as far as North Korea is concerned – can be found in the country's forced demarcation and the constant threats from the outside. In the beginning Kim Il-sung tried to hide behind the one-party system. The outer shape seemingly took the form of institutions of "socialist democracy"<sup>3</sup>. The central issue, however, has been to maintain the more and more extremist personal cult, and to ensure its legitimacy and inheritance.

Till now the main goals were accomplished through propaganda, brainwashing, and "ideological and political re-education" of the population for generations. The domestic political life and ideological propaganda of the DPRK has always been full of political slogans, "leader-ideologies" and "-theories", and conceived accounts about overall national and international triumph. Amongst other factors North Korea's enforcement of a certain economic policy proved fatal with respect to the economic development of the country: the politics of the DPRK didn't accommodate the country's economic

type of economic model. However it is a fact that such countries were not able to safeguard technologies the way Japan or the United States did.

<sup>3</sup> Ho, Gwan-sob (2008): "Policy of Songun and Socialist Democracy", in: Naenara, Pyongyang Articles on Sŏn'gun No. 475, <http://www.kcckp.net/ru>, accessed 10 June 2008.

traits and demands. Instead ideas and slogans of political propaganda were forced on the economy.<sup>4</sup> In short, unlike South Korea, Kim Il-sung considered economic policy as a means of strengthening and keeping his personal power and realizing his dynastic plans.

It is a fact that – even several times during the regency of Kim Il-sung – the political regime of the DPRK attempted a formal administrative reorganization in order to install government authorities who ought to govern the economy. However, it never touched the essence of the conservative-type (“socialist”?) economic system. Rather North Korea fiercely condemned the economic reform efforts of Central and Eastern European countries.<sup>5</sup>

By the way I should remark that Kim Il-sung considered the effective succession of his first-born son Kim Jong-il as leader, and consequently the implementation of a “socialist monarchy” as the main result of his politics.

In his view the lack of “continuity of power” and the underestimation of the political importance of the military were the main reasons for the collapse of the Eastern-Central European socialist system.

It cannot be denied that despite the daily suffering for subsistence, long-term economic difficulties, and hard administrative measurements set by the dictatorship, the North Korean political system especially during the zenith of Kim Il-sung's charismatic leadership in the 1960's and 1970's had a strong social base and wide mass support. This was of course a result of

huge nationalistic propaganda that had been pursued for generations. The North Korean People's Army played a crucial role as a military-political (national defence) and economy-activating (constructor) factor. However, we have to point out that during Kim Il-sung's lifetime the army was the means of politics and not their prerequisite. Kim Il-sung successfully fought several “bonapartist” attempts and conspiratorial aspirations (whereas the Pyongyang press referred to them only indirectly).

In the course of everyday's domestic propaganda Pyongyang leaders have been accusing the United States and South Korea of initiating the Korean War. Using this as an excuse North Korea has comprehensively militarized social, political, economic, and cultural life of the country, the society, and the individual. With the argument of permanent foreign threats not only due to the enormous presence of US troops in South Korea, North Korean leaders explain their military doctrine as an “active defence”.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, that this rather serves inner political objectives such as the complete enforcement of the personal/clan dictatorship.

North Korea's “strategic defence conception” of 1962 includes the following:

- a) arming all people
- b) build the country into an unconquerable fortress
- c) regular training of potential military leaders
- d) continuous modernization of the armed forces.<sup>7</sup>

Although these aims can rather be seen as propagandistic, their concretization has

<sup>4</sup> In place of Lenin's well-known theory “politics is concentrated economy” North Korea used the subjective practice of “economy is concentrated politics”.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning North Korea it was repeated by Rodong Sinmun, 21 November 2008: „'Imperialists' despicable scheme to lead DPRK to 'reform' and 'opening' failed”, accessed 30 November 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Seoul has not signed the 1953 July disarmament agreement yet.

<sup>7</sup> Faludi, Peter (2004): “Tenyek es adatok a koreai fegyveres erokrol” [Facts and Data on the Korean Military Forces], in: Uj Honvedsegi Szemle [New Army Review], Vol. LVIII, No. 6, 38.

had disastrous consequences on North Korea's economy: it took away both skilled labour (about 60,000 people worked in the war industry) and quality products (steel, cement etc.). Moreover it devoured tremendous sums from the budget (about 19-25%). It is true that mainly soldiers instead of organized labourers worked on the prime industrial construction sites of the disordered economy. During their five to ten years long military service soldiers got professional training, too. Foreign sources put the number of soldiers of the Korean People's Army at 1.1 million. In contrast the population of the DPRK at present is an estimated 26 to 27 million<sup>8</sup>, which was confirmed indirectly by Kim Jong-il in a private talk.<sup>9</sup>

However, at the beginning of the 1990's still during the reign of Kim Il-sung the role of the Korean People's Army as a military and political factor has basically changed. North Korean leaders were forced to accept the need for a change due to several national and international reasons.

First of all it became quite obvious that the population had got "tired" (though this is less noticeable from the outside), more and more passive and uninterested in the mobilization of propaganda as well as the repetition of slogans. In addition there was the persistent economic crisis, the notorious lack of food, and the several decade-long deterioration of the already poor level of living. Furthermore the North Korean economy was struck by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries and consequently deprived from its international political connections. E.g. the Soviet/Russian-North Korean foreign trade was US\$ 2.5 billion in 1990, 365 mil-

lion in 1991, and US\$ 38.5 million in 2000.<sup>10</sup>

Also the political and military confrontation between the DPRK and the United States grew more acute. What is more, North Korea had a huge foreign debt since due to incorrect economic evaluations several short term company and bank loans (in U.S. dollars) were taken from the West. Thus the country had to announce its insolvency. In 1993 Pyongyang leaders had to officially admit the failure of the 1987 to 1993 seven-year plan. This had been unprecedented in the history of socialist countries. North Korea could not turn a blind eye to the South Korean "economic miracle" either, if they did not want to fall into the trap of their own propaganda (there had been examples for that, too), whose functionality was "shaky" even among the population (e.g.: the number of deserters which had been quite rare before grew to several hundred and then several thousand a year. Among the deserters were even leading party workers and members of the elite.)<sup>11</sup>. As a consequence of severe natural disasters the DPRK even had to officially admit the food crisis. Later they had to apply for international humanitarian aid at several occasions (e.g. in 2008). To describe the situation let me quote some uncommon statement from the North Korean press: "Korea has been in an incredibly difficult situation for 10 years. As a consequence of the socialist markets falling apart, the conditions of economic growth have deteriorated, what is more the economic sanctions and blockade of the USA have be-

<sup>8</sup> editor's note: the population estimate provided by the CIA world fact book is much lower, about 22.6 million

<sup>9</sup> Pulikovski K. (2002): *Vostotsniy express po Rossii s Kim Tsen Irom*: Moscow, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Pankina I.O. (2008): "Pritsinui vozniknoveniya, pazvitiya i osobennosti" [Songun Policy in the DPRK: the Cause of Origin, Development and Specifics), Lecture at the Annual Conference, Institute of Far East RAN, Moscow, March 2008.

<sup>11</sup> editor's note: the prime example is Hwang Jang Yop, a leading ideologue and KWP Central Committee member who is credited with developing *chuch'e*, and who fled to South Korea in 1997

come extremely hard. Because of a series of natural disasters there has been a serious lack of food, and production in factories of different industries has stopped.”<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of the 1990's the South Korean ex-prime minister (who had previously negotiated with the North Korean prime minister during his first-time visit to Seoul) said to the author that according to North Korea's prime minister there were so many cars on the streets of Seoul because “each driver in the country was ordered to drive to Seoul in order to make the Northern delegation astonished”.

### **Si vi pacem...**

In the situation described above Pyongyang leaders on the one hand had to prevent unrest and any possible action against the system and themselves. They had to ensure their legitimacy and the “mass base” of their policy. Also they had to prevent any “hostile”, “imperialist”, etc. impacts on the DPRK. On the other hand they had to reduce the influence of the “international environment”. North Korea wanted to partly realize these objectives in the last years of Kim Il-sung and thereafter. The DPRK acted in reference to a Korean interpretation of the well-known saying: “Si vi pacem, para bellum” (if you want peace, prepare for war)<sup>13</sup>.

Here we must point out something else which analysts usually do not take into consideration but what the author considers as actually quite important. It might have had a certain influence on the rearrangement of strategy and tactical behaviour of North Korea since the 1990's. That is namely the “Eastern-Central European

factor”. This does not simply refer to the previously mentioned consequences of the breakdown of the “socialist block” but also to the fact that the parties in power in the Eastern-Central European countries failed for decades as did the one-party system. Korean leaders paying special attention to and worrying about the changes regarded reform experiments of the parties as the starting point of the following calamities. Therefore Pyongyang wanted to avoid similar occurrences at all costs. Moreover North Korea was determined to prevent reports on the destiny accounts of highest leaders like what happened e. g. in Romania or the GDR. It seems like a “sign of opposition” that the Rodong Sinmun nevertheless put the news of the execution of the Ceausescu couple on the last page despite the fact that they usually had never mentioned assassinations – instead they sometimes rather reported on “sudden deaths” – of foreign leaders (e.g. Olaf Palme, Anvar Sadat, Indira Gandhi, etc.) before.

### **“Socialist Monarchy” and...**

During this extremely complicated situation for the DPRK in terms of domestic politics and foreign affairs, Kim Il-sung was convinced that the army could ensure the maintenance of the system as well as the legitimacy of Kim Jong-il as his successor. Beside the fact that in the past decades potential but in the end unsuccessful attempts of the “opposition” were initiated by higher party leaders, the Korean People's Army was the only well organized force in the country, and the only disciplined “mass base”. Kim Il-sung could rely on gradually eclipsing the role of the Worker's Party of Korea.

North Korean factories hardly worked with an efficiency of 30 to 40% of their capacities or even did not work at all due to the

<sup>12</sup> Naenara (2008): Pyongyang Articles on Sŏn'gun No. 717, <http://www.kcckp.net/ru>, accessed 30 October 2008.

<sup>13</sup> We can also refer to Sŭnzŭs famous “The Art of War”.

lack of electricity and raw materials, thus workers also took a back seat. However, it seemed easier to govern within military structures (and Pyongyang has always tended to do that) by referring to strict vertical subordination instead of a “civil” framework. The preparation and legitimacy-building of the “heir” had been started by Kim Il-sung himself. Kim Jong-il became member of the Political Committee of the Korean Worker’s Party in 1974. Later he was appointed to the secretary of the Central Committee. Although he had never served in the military he became marshal and was made the commander-in-chief of the Korean People’s Army in December 1991.<sup>14</sup> Kim Junior became the head of the National Defence Committee of the DPRK (which later developed into the most powerful body in North Korea) in 1993 when his father was still alive. Through all this the handing over of power and the legitimacy of inheritance seemed to be certain even within different boards.<sup>15</sup>

However, the planned handing over of power was accompanied by an aggravation of the economic crisis and years of terrible disasters (floods, droughts and famines). All this turned the situation of the country critical from the mid 1990’s on.

After the death of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il was not officially inaugurated into the highest party and state offices. Instead according to Confucian tradition a three year mourning period was ordered. Kim Jong-il wanted to make use of his official absence in order to consolidate his power and to stabilize the socio-political situation

that was relying on his father’s inheritance – the People’s Army.

In 1998 through an alteration of the Constitution Kim Il-sung was declared the “eternal president”, hereby strengthening his successor’s position, too. This also implicitly signified that Kim Jong-il needs his father’s “prestige” for his own legitimacy and ideological backup.

After the death of Kim Il-sung, the increasing severity of the economic crisis, and the ravage of several natural disasters made it necessary to mobilize the masses. For this reason in December 1994 Kim Jong-il for the first time announced the so-called “sŏn’gun-policy”, i.e. “military first policy” as a means of rapid mobilization of the masses. The new concept quickly penetrated all areas of social and political life in North Korea. Therewith Kim Jong-il wanted to demonstrate how grateful he was for the support he had received from the army.

Let me remark that as S. O. Kurbanov, professor of St. Petersburg University has pointed out, the expression “sŏn’gun” had neither appeared in a North Korean nor in a South Korean dictionary before.<sup>16</sup> In the beginning it worked only as a political propaganda slogan for mobilizing the people. Following the inauguration of the Bush administration and the rising tensions within the US-North Korea relations it became a general, all-embracing policy for literally everything from 2001 on. At that point the strengthening of national defence and the protection of independence became the central issues of sŏn’gun.

Henceforward according to sŏn’gun it was a prerequisite that all parts of society

---

<sup>14</sup> According to the Constitution in fact only the head of the state, president Kim Il-sung could have done this job.

<sup>15</sup> At this point the author does not intend to deal with the present guessing game of international media regarding a potential heir to the 66 years old Kim Jong-il.

---

<sup>16</sup> Kurbanov, S.O. (2001): “Osnovnie polozenia severokoreiskih ‘idei prioriteta armii’ – songun” [Fundamental Theses of North Korean ‘Army First Ideas’ - Songun], in : Vostochnaya kollekcija, No. 4 (Autumn 2001): Moscow, 58-65.

must be transformed commensurate with the structure of the army. A slogan saying that the army is the party, the state and the people itself was emphasized and enforced. It always echoed in Pyongyang that “the army is the main driving force of the revolution”<sup>17</sup> (that is to say the main supporter of the system).

Due to the alleged permanent threats of war it is the duty of every single soldier to protect the revolution, the independence of the country and especially Kim Jong-il as the great leader of the revolution (who regularly promoted hundreds of officers of the People's Army). It is because of the sŏn'gun policy that peace was kept alive on the Korean Peninsula, and that people from the North and the South could live under stable conditions. – Statements like that appeared daily in North Korean press and propaganda publications.

Interestingly all this happened even though the theoretical meaning of sŏn'gun has never been systematically outlined in Pyongyang. In January 2003 Kim Jong-il said to the Central Committee of the Korean Worker's Party: “For the first time in the history of the revolutionary movement our party defined that the troops come before the proletariat, and it was also our party that defined the People's Army as the vanguard and the main driving force of the revolution.” Referring to the natural disasters and the economic crisis of 1995 to 1997 he further declared: “The People's Army was the first one that fought back the difficulties.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 21 September 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 10 October 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, Jong-il (2003): “Linia songunskoi revolyucii – eto velikaya revolyucionnaya linia nashei epohi, vsepobezhdayustseye znamya nashei revolyucii [The Revolutionary Line of Songun – it is the Great Revolutionary Tendency and Victorious Flag of our Revolution], Meeting with Officials of the Central

By and by sŏn'gun policy became more and more fierce in words. Reason for that was the re-emerging nuclear issue and Washington's openly announced “regime change” policy towards North Korea. Now and then articles appeared in Pyongyang press and propaganda which exemplify the increase of pugnaciousness: “power originates from weapons and it is weapons that maintain power”<sup>19</sup>; “the basis of revolutionary fight is weapons”<sup>20</sup>, etc.<sup>21</sup>

The reader should keep in mind that the North Korean missile experiments of the past decades as well as recent primitive nuclear testing served rather domestic and foreign political objectives than strengthening armament and readiness for war.

From a technical and technological point of view it is obviously no secret that despite large numbers of soldiers, North Korean armed forces are backward and timeworn. Not to mention the permanent lack of fuel and supplying industry. The reason for the emphasis of slogans like “the strength of weapons is in their ideology”<sup>22</sup>, “weapons without ideologies are weaker than sticks”<sup>23</sup> or “the reason for the corrosion of a weapon is ideological weakness”<sup>24</sup> has its grounding in the con-

---

Committee of the WPK, 29 January 2003: Pyongyang

<sup>19</sup> Kurbanov, S.O. (2001): “Osnovnie polozhenia severokoreiskih ‘idei prioriteta armii’ – songun” [Fundamental Theses of North Korean ‘Army First Ideas’ - Songun], <http://www.rauk.ru>, accessed 30 October 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Idem.

<sup>21</sup> It is unlikely that these „late reminiscences“ that reminded everybody of Máo Zédōngs (1893-1976) slogan “power stems from the gun-barrel” were endorsed in Beijing.

<sup>22</sup> Kurbanov, S.O. (2001): “Osnovnie polozhenia severokoreiskih ‘idei prioriteta armii’ – songun” [Fundamental Theses of North Korean ‘Army First Ideas’ - Songun], <http://www.rauk.ru>, accessed 30 October 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Idem.

<sup>24</sup> Idem.

stant fear of imperialism or loosening current lifestyle (A fear of a possible change to exuberant alcoholism, woman maltreatment, materialism, etc).

Sentences like “socialism progresses in Korea with the strength of self-reliance” or “Sŏn'gun policy is a great ideological weapon that rests on burning patriotism”<sup>25</sup> serve similar objectives.

So the main purposes are still mobilization of society or population for forthcoming tasks, strengthening the commitment towards the system, and military control of the masses. What also has started in Pyongyang's sŏn'gun propaganda is some kind of mystification. As already mentioned above it was Kim Jong-il who first referred to sŏn'gun in 1993/94. However, later it was put as follows: “he started the sŏn'gun type of leadership in 1960” (at the age of 18!)<sup>26</sup>

At once it turned out that actually Kim Il-sung has to be founder of sŏn'gun theory (again legitimacy of the father's prestige). What is more: “its historical origin is the two pistols Kim Il-sung's dying father left for his 14 years old son” (at that time his name was Kim Song-ju), or “Sŏn'gun has its origin in the founding of ‘Down with Imperialism Union’ (DIU)”<sup>27</sup> (formed by Kim Il-sung on 1926 October 17th).

It is no wonder then that the “grandson of sŏn'gun policy Kim Jong-il not only guarantees the current state of humanity but also

its future”<sup>28</sup> and that “[...] the whole world admires the great sŏn'gun policy”<sup>29</sup>. The press regularly writes about conferences being held all over the world introducing and praising the spirit of sŏn'gun.

However, finally it seems that sŏn'gun policy despite of its fighting spirit is not aggressive; it is rather protective and basically serves domestic objectives.<sup>30</sup> It is a fact that danger rather derives from individual soldiers who have been indoctrinated for generations.<sup>31</sup> The ambivalence here is indirectly supported by the fact that while Pyongyang press publishes long and polemic articles about the Korea policy of the United States, and the war-mongering of American imperialism against North Korea, the relationships between Pyongyang and Washington are becoming more widespread and gradually encompass more issues.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 20 October 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 28 October 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 02 June 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 28 October 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Kurbanov, S.O. (2001): “Osnovnie polozhenia severokoreiskih ‘idei prioriteta armii’ – songun” [Fundamental Theses of North Korean ‘Army First Ideas’ - Songun], in : Vostochnaya kollekcija, No. 4 (Autumn 2001): Moscow, 58-65.

<sup>31</sup> Armed local incidents in the Armistice zone were – let's say – “committed” and not “carried out” by officers.

<sup>32</sup> For instance North Korean students at Syracuse University which later on organized the e-library of Kimchaek Technical University, American language instructors who are invited to Pyongyang, the opening of the AP-TV office in Pyongyang, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in North Korea, the North Korean Symphonic Orchestra in the United States, etc. Furthermore we could mention the opening of the office of Kyodo Japanese News Agency and the office of the British Council in Pyongyang, too. Members of the US Congress are visiting Pyongyang one after the other, not to mention that several US diplomats have been in the capital of the DPRK so far. See different reports of Seoul and Pyongyang News Agencies in 2006 – 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 20 February 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 10 October 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Apteyeva O.A. (2008): “Ideologitseskie ustanovki TPK na sovremennom etape” [Ideological Theses of WPK in the Modern Stage], Lecture at the Conference of Korean Studies, Institute of Far East RAN, March 2008

<sup>27</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 17 October 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 28 October 2008.

The other side of the coin is that on the 55th anniversary of the ceasefire agreement ending the Korean War on 1953 July 27th, the North Korean chief of the general staff and the commander-in-chief of the American troops in South Korea exchanged combative threats of war (we might say that this is their duty).<sup>33</sup> Or the US-North Korean squabbling regarding the nuclear program during the six-party talks in Beijing as well as on other occasions.<sup>34</sup>

“The Moor has done its duty...” what about sŏn'gun? There had been a detectable shift of emphasis in Pyongyang's sŏn'gun policy since fall 2007. The party as a leading factor has been put in front again. “The Korean Labour Party demonstrates its strength as the influential leading force of the sŏn'gun revolution”.<sup>35</sup>

Since for a long time Kim Jong-il generally appeared as the head of the National Defence Committee and not as the first secretary of the Korean Labour Party today his party leading position is emphasized. Whilst in the past he was usually accompanied by several generals on his common visits to different units of the People's Army, these days only one or two officers appear next to him. Now Kim Jong-il is mainly accompanied by party leaders, heads of departments of the Central Committee and province leaders.<sup>36</sup>

Kim Jong-il urges (as even Seoul press recognized) that certain military units – besides strengthening the revolutionary ideology and preparedness to fight – should

have their own economic workshops to improve their living conditions.<sup>37</sup>

I would like to allude to the editorial of the central newspapers in Pyongyang on 2008 January 1st. The long article defining the main tasks for this year emphasized the importance of improving the economy and other economic assignments after the “liturgical introduction”.

Sŏn'gun was not mentioned as the basis for politics or as a defining factor anymore; it only appeared as a recurring attribute.<sup>38</sup>

Referring to the article Kim Jong-il pointed out that “all the party, all the country, and the entire nation must start a general offensive to create economic power”<sup>39</sup>. And “at the moment there is not any other more urgent and important task than solving the food problem!”<sup>40</sup> This shift of emphasis is expressed by an article of Rodong Sinmun on 2008 March 10th: “Let's realize the line of economic building in the Sŏn'gun age”. The newspaper urges active realization of the Labour Party's policy regarding national economy in order to create a strong and fruitful socialist nation.

Although the article also emphasizes the development of heavy industry as industry of national defence, elsewhere we have already noticed statements like “the sŏn'gun policy has already done its job” in the context of strengthening national defence. Now in the name of sŏn'gun it is the economic policy of the country that comes next. According to some commentaries from Seoul it is not impossible that

<sup>33</sup> See these days' Yonhap and KCNA News Agency reports.

<sup>34</sup> Both parties are interested in keeping “manageable tension” in their diplomatic relations.

<sup>35</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 05 August 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 28 October 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Therefore he is not referred to as the head of the National Defence Committee.

<sup>37</sup> Rodong Sinmun, July and August 2008, Xinhua News: “Top DPRK leader urges army to develop sideline economy”, Pyongyang, 2008/08/05.

<sup>38</sup> Rodong Sinmun, KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, 01 January 2008, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>, accessed 28 October 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Idem.

<sup>40</sup> Idem.

the selection of Kim Jong-il's successor and the North Korean nuclear testing also has to do with the "return" of the Labour Party.<sup>41</sup> Supposedly on 2008 February 1st province party committees were instructed "to pay more attention to local parties than to the armed forces".<sup>42</sup>

However, it is also a fact that articles from Pyongyang press are still quite contradictory regarding content. They probably reflect a tug of war behind the scenes and a fight for political influence.<sup>43</sup> During the last decade the notion of sŏn'gun was attached to the person of Kim Jong-il so close that it cannot be rejected as a slogan or reference. That's why it received the current interpretation of mobilizing people for forthcoming tasks ("rubber ideology"). In addition it seems that sŏn'gun always has to build the underlying motif of political action in North Korea.<sup>44</sup>

### How to go on? Monarchic Dictatorship?

The North Korea issue is still complicated, contradictory and not easy to evaluate for the foreign analyst. One should always anticipate unexpected turns and events. Still, we can say that North Korea has

"booked space" in world press which cannot be paid, not even in millions of dollars.

The long-range predictions of international analysts have mostly not proved true. It seems that the sŏn'gun policy of Kim Jong-il has temporarily solved the basic problems, that is to say the maintenance of the system and the leadership despite the difficulties described above. Till when? The tasks that were set up in the New Year's Day editorial could be realistic on the longer run. However, where does the material basis for their realization come from? It is not possible to continuously ensure the population's food supply only through foreign aid. Considerable foreign economic and financial investments would definitely need bigger and more serious domestic, economic and financial reforms ("Changing regime"?). No matter how, transition necessitates some kind of military dictatorship – severe or moderate<sup>45</sup> (During the past ten years Kim Jong-il referred respectfully to Park Chung-hee concerning the role of his military dictatorship in the context of South Korean modernization. What is more he welcomed Park Chung-hee's daughter who was candidate in South Korean presidential elections in Pyongyang, too.).

Kim Jong-il must pursue a difficult, "balanced", "rope-walking" policy towards both his party and the People's Army, towards the South and other major powers.

In doing so he also has to cope with severe domestic problems (the rehabilitation of the weakened base of the system; in this regard I would consider success as rather doubtful), not to mention the tensions within his family and clan.

<sup>41</sup> It would be difficult to put a 25 to 30 years old, today still unknown young man in the leading positions of the People's Army, the party and the state in the course of an unexpected sudden situation.

<sup>42</sup> Professor Huh Nam-sung of the Korea National Defence University at the parliamentary forum, Yonhap Seoul News Agency (2007/2008), 22 September 2008, <http://www.yna.co.kr>, accessed 28 October 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Even the Korean history of the „Middle Ages“ was characterized by political struggles of civilian and military leaders and organizations.

<sup>44</sup> „Transition“ and „development“ might become the tasks of one of Kim Jong-il's sons. But it is not impossible to have a collective leadership in an upcoming period of transition, too.

<sup>45</sup> South Korea would not be against this either due to serious speculations about immediate mass migration from the North. Not to mention China.

## Conclusion?

By the time of this writing in winter of 2008/2009 it would be difficult to say more than that about the domestic situation in North Korea. It seems to me that the conflict between the party and the army may go on; military leaders might not have said their final words yet. In Pyongyang the 60th anniversary of the formation of the DPRK (1948 September 9th) was celebrated. The goal that was officially set is to put the economy back into orderly conditions by 2012 April 15th, that is the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung. If something unexpected occurs - which is always possible in Korea - the Labour Party's next (7th) congress could be held.<sup>46</sup> Professor Rüdiger Frank shares the same opinion: "What could happen next? [...] For quite some time, the North Korean media have been pointing at the year 2012, the 100th birthday of late Kim Il-sung, [...] as an important turning point. This could be the year of the long-awaited 7th Party Congress [...] the next Great Leader of North Korea could be Mother Party."<sup>47</sup>

Professor Huh Nam-sung of Korea National Defence University underlined the international circumstances of this question at a parliamentary forum: "We have to pay attention to the year 2012. Four years from now presidential elections will be held in both the United States and North Korea, Seoul will take over operational control of its forces, and China's

democratization will flow into North Korean society"<sup>48</sup>.

---

<sup>46</sup> The 6th congress was held in 1980. The Central Committee has not had an official meeting since December 1993.

<sup>47</sup> Frank, Rüdiger (2008b): "Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced?", in: Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online 08-08 0A, 21 October 2008, <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08080Frank.html>, accessed 28 October 2008.

---

<sup>48</sup> Yonhap Seoul News Agency (2007/2008), 22 September 2008, <http://www.yna.co.kr>, accessed 28 October 2008.

## Bibliography

- Apteyeva O.A. (2008): "Ideologitseskie ustanovki TPK na sovremennom etape" [Ideological Theses of WPK in the Modern Stage], Lecture at the Conference of Korean Studies, Institute of Far East RAN, March 2008
- Faludi, Peter (2004): "Tenyek es adatok a koreai fegyveres erokrol" [Facts and Data on the Korean Military Forces], in: Uj Honvedsegi Szemle [New Army Review], Vol. LVIII, No. 6
- Frank, Rüdiger (2008a): North Korea: Domestic Politics and Economy, in: Frank, Rüdiger, Jim Hoare, Patrick Köllner and Susan Pares (eds.): Korea 2008: Politics, Economy, and Society, Leiden and Boston: Brill 2009, pp. 27-44
- Frank, Rüdiger (2008b): "Has the Next Great Leader of North Korea Been Announced?", in: Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online 08-08 0A, 21 October 2008, <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08080Frank.html>, accessed 28 October 2008
- Ho, Gwan-sob (2008): "Policy of Songun and Socialist Democracy", in: Naenara, Pyongyang Articles on Sŏn'gun No. 475, <http://www.kcckp.net/ru>, accessed 10 June 2008
- Kim, Jong-il (2003): "Linia songunskoi revolyucii – eto velikaya revolyucionnaya linia nashei epohi, vsepo-bezhdayustseye znamya nashei revolyucii [The Revolutionary Line of Songun – it is the Great Revolutionary Tendency and Victorious Flag of our Revolution], Meeting with Officials of the Central Committee of the WPK, 29 January 2003: Pyongyang
- Kurbanov, S.O. (2001): "Osnovnie polozhenia severokoreiskih 'idei prioriteta armii' – songun" [Fundamental Theses of North Korean 'Army First Ideas' - Songun], in : Vostochnaya kollekcija, No. 4 (Autumn 2001): Moscow, 58-65
- Kurbanov, S.O. (2001): "Osnovnie polozhenia severokoreiskih 'idei prioriteta armii' – songun" [Fundamental Theses of North Korean 'Army First Ideas' - Songun], <http://www.rauk.ru>, accessed 30 October 2008
- Naenara (2008): Pyongyang Articles on Sŏn'gun No. 717, <http://www.kcckp.net/ru>, accessed 30 October 2008
- Pankina I.O. (2008): "Pritsinui vozniknoveniya, pazvitiya i osobennosti" [Songun Policy in the DPRK: the Cause of Origin, Development and Specifics], Lecture at the Annual Conference, Institute of Far East RAN, Moscow, March 2008
- Pulikovski K. (2002): Vostotsniy express po Rossii s Kim Tsen Irom: Moscow
- Rodong Sinmun (2006/2007/2008): KCNA, Pyongyang Daily Reports, <http://www.kcna.co.jp>
- Yonhap Seoul News Agency (2007/2008): <http://www.yna.co.kr>, accessed 22 September 2008

University of Vienna  
East Asian Institute  
Chair of East Asian Economy and Society  
Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2.3  
1090 Vienna  
- Austria –

<http://wirtschaft.ostasien.univie.ac.at/>