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North Korea’s foreign policy behavior has long intrigued scholars, puzzled laymen, frustrated negotiators, and aggravated policy-makers. The world has regarded North Korea as an unpredictable rogue state and a source of conflict and alarm to the international community. Controversies surrounding North Korea’s nuclear facilities and missile technology have persisted for the past twenty years, and Pyongyang again sent shock waves through the international community in 2009 when it tested a second nuclear device and a barrage of missiles. Subsequently, the Six-party Talks became deadlocked and the international community began to implement unprecedented tough sanctions on Pyongyang after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1874.

In addition, Kim Jong Il’s illness triggered fears of instability in the North Korean system and even a sudden collapse of the regime. With the United States and South Korea producing contingency plans for a possibly chaotic post-Kim Jong Il era, concerns over Kim’s health reignited a debate over the succession issue and rekindled interest in the impact of the succession on Pyongyang’s future foreign policy directions.

In the midst of the escalating tensions, however, North Korea initiated a peace offensive toward the United States and South Korea in the latter part of 2009, following former president Clinton’s visit to Pyongyang in August. His visit aimed at securing the release of two American journalists who were collecting information on the plight of North Korean refugees along North Korea’s border with China. In the middle of unprecedented confrontational bilateral relations, the jour-
CHAPTER ONE

Socialist Neoconservatism and North Korean Foreign Policy

RÜDIGER FRANK

Introduction

The North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test of April 2009 and the nuclear test of May 2009 have rekindled interest in North Korea’s foreign policy and its domestic origins. As usual, there are more questions than answers, but we can now even less afford not having the best possible understanding of current developments and future actions. This chapter therefore aims to contribute to the debate on the following questions: What has prompted North Korea to intensify its nuclear program? What are the domestic drivers of such a policy? How does this fit into the overall picture of North Korea’s foreign policy? We will do so by having a closer look at the domestic developments of the past years, which have shown tremendous dynamics, from initiation of reforms to their subsequent reversal. A quantitative analysis of North Korean propaganda supports our qualitative assessment.

No matter which of the major theories of international relations is applied, domestic developments usually play a major role. This is particularly true for a short-term and midterm time horizon. While liberal thinking from the outset assigns a pivotal role to individuals, even
the emergence and formation of values and interests beyond the mere question of power maximization and regime survival. While we will mostly focus on very specific questions in this paper, it is nevertheless helpful to understand that these issues can be applied in a larger theoretically informed context.

In principle, we argue that, after a brief reform period, North Korea is now returning to the specific, orthodox form of socialism that has been created under Kim II Sung since the late 1950s and was applied until about the mid-1990s. In fact, North Korean propaganda repeatedly referred to the 1950s and 1960s as their new point of reference (discussed below). The ideological doctrine of what we call “socialist neoconservatism” in the sense of a return to conservative, non-reformist socialist values is closely connected to all the issues that are currently of interest to analysts of North Korea and strongly affects economic policy including inter-Korean cooperation at Kaesong and the resuscitation of the Ch'ollima movement. This new old trend in ideology also informs our interpretation of the nuclear and missile tests of 2009, as well as the overall analysis of North Korea’s foreign policy and its behavior in the Six-party Talks.

**Ideology Is the Key**

It is often not appropriately appreciated that socialist ideology is far more than a bizarre feature of political and economic systems that are alien to most individuals in the West. Ideology is or has been the central issue for all socialist societies, since it represents the core around which everything else is grouped, including the all-important legitimacy of the leadership, economic policies, or foreign affairs. If we want to understand how individual policies should be interpreted, their placement within the realm of the ideological substructure of the affected society is crucial. It is no coincidence that one of the standard works on socialism identifies a dominant ideology as one key characteristic of all such systems. Kornai argues that, eventually, socialism develops into a good of intrinsic value. North Korea (or the Democratic People’s Republic, DPRK) is no exception, although we would suggest that due to the semireligious nature of the duch’oe ideology and the cult around Kim Il Sung, this statement applies at an even higher degree than in most other socialist systems that we have known.

regarded as negative behavior and is displayed as inferior to collectivism (chiptanjuui). The DPRK constitution of 1998 reflects this in article 63: “In the DPRK the rights and duties of citizens are based on the collectivist principle, ‘One for all and all for one.’”

From a systemic point of view, this monolithic ideology is North Korea’s biggest strength and, at the same time, its greatest weakness. It has managed to keep the country together despite severe shocks and hardships such as the collapse of the socialist system in Europe around 1990, the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, or the famine of 1995–1997. On the other hand, while the foundation on which the North Korean system is standing ideologically is very strong, it consists only of one “leg” or pillar. In pluralist societies, even though single ideological approaches and political ideas might fail or get out of favor, this will not shake the stability of the whole society since there are so many other ideas and ideologies that still remain intact. This is why developed democracies are enormously robust and crisis prone despite the relative weakness of the single elements of their ideological foundation. If something goes wrong, the leadership is replaced, not the political system as such. Citizens as a group are usually very little preoccupied with ideology, although they might have strong ideological positions as individuals.

The situation is much different in socialist countries. As long as their core ideology is not threatened, they can ensure stability of political power for a considerable time even if the government fails to deliver on economic promises, since leadership, political system, and ideology are seen as forming one entity. But as soon as ideology gets shaken, the whole system is in danger of collapsing. In fact, this is how we can interpret the sudden implosion of the socialist systems in Eastern Europe. Along the same logic, Kim Jong Il urged to preserve a conservative attitude and not begin to follow the deadly trend of reforming socialism:

The most serious lesson of the collapse of socialism in several countries is that the corruption of socialism begins with ideological corruption, and that a breakdown on the ideological front results in the crumbling of all socialism’s fronts and ends in the total ruin of socialism... If it secures ideology, socialism will triumph; if it loses ideology, socialism will go to ruin... If the ideological bulwark falls down, socialism will be unable to defend itself no matter how great its economic and military power may be.
unclear whether he initiated or just tolerated the changes, whether he had this in mind since his visits to China in 1983 but had to wait until he came to power, or whether the 2000 summit with Kim Dae Jung influenced his decision. It is relatively safe to assume that the famine in the late 1990s played a major role, at least as a catalyst. In hindsight, we now know that the economic adjustment measures were indeed (just) another perfection drive, that is, an attempt to make the system work and not to replace it. Reformers not having gone far enough, the return to orthodox positions was inevitable, including a sharply reduced propensity to risk-taking, innovation, and dynamism. We therefore call this new old policy line “socialist neoconservatism.”

Conservative, Orthodox Socialism

What exactly is North Korea returning to? What is “conservative socialism” in a North Korean context? Without a doubt, North Korean socialism is closely connected with the person of Kim Il Sung. We know that during his guerilla days, and as a member of the Chinese Communist Party, he has been heavily influenced by his senior Chinese comrades and their views. We also know that he later spent considerable time in Russia, where he was trained according to the prevailing Soviet doctrine of that time—something that can roughly be described as Stalinism, although the term carries meanings that make its application to other cases at least questionable.

But we should not forget that Kim was born in 1912. By 1945, he was just thirty-three years old, and he could have by no means expected that he would indeed be able to triumph over all his formidable political competitors and become the de facto leader of North Korea a few years later. It was the combination of the feeling of betrayal, as the Soviet Union did not participate in the Korean War, Stalin’s death in 1953, the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow of 1956, the fierce fight with the pro-Chinese and the pro-Soviet factions of the Korean Communist movement, the chaos emerging in China during the Great Leap, the disappointment with the Soviet complacency in the Cuban missile crisis, the fear of the new military government in South Korea since 1961, and the general unease regarding Moscow’s new line of collective leadership and peaceful coexistence that prompted Kim Il Sung to develop and emphasize his own Korean version of socialism that later became known as chuch’e.

As his life experience under Japanese colonialism and his frustration with Korea’s division after liberation explains, Kim was driven by nationalism and the fear of a loss of independence. The role played by the Great Powers in Korea since the late nineteenth century made him xenophobic. But this does not mean that he had developed his blueprint of a Korean version of socialism right after he left his home village of Man’gyöngdae for the Manchurian exile in 1925, although official North Korean propaganda would like to make us believe so. Rather, he was very happy with adapting the Soviet model in the early years of North Korean nation building, not only because this would grant him Moscow’s generous economic support and military protection, but also because this was the one model that he knew and that obviously had worked. North Korean official historiography produces a very different picture today, but this should not obscure our view of the fact that, until the mid-1950s, Kim Il Sung saw no reason not to follow the Soviet example.

We would therefore suggest the emergence of the “chuch’e system” as the time when socialist orthodoxy was created in North Korea, that is, roughly from the mid- and late 1950s until the early and mid-1960s. This orthodoxy had its roots in Stalin’s system that was quickly getting out of favor after 1956, but it was not a copy of it. We have discussed the crucial function of a stable ideology in a socialist system. Kim Il Sung could not be as risk-taking as the Russians or the Chinese were, since his legitimacy was shaky after a factional fight and the lost Korean War (although he had quickly declared it a victory). Mao could afford to destroy public order in China, since he knew he could restore it. Kim Il Sung would not dare to gamble in a similar way. Among the other restrictions he had to consider was the problem of a divided country that required very specific measures, such as a heavy nationalist component. The fresh and painful experience of Japanese colonization, coupled with the absence of Soviet support during the Korean War and the feeling of being stuck between two major adversaries, made national independence another key element of his blueprint for the perfect system. Thus, North Korean socialism developed and was taking shape by the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Despite their uniform description as being “socialist,” which we regard as correct, no socialist country was similar to the other. This became particularly obvious in the post-socialist transformation period. Within the socialist camp, North Korea had always stood out as being particularly unique. The DPRK neither joined the Warsaw Treaty nor was it a full-fledged member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon). Kim Il Sung refused to follow the Soviet process of de-Stalinization. Around the time when the Chinese started
their Hundred Flowers Campaign, North Korea experienced a coup against Kim Il Sung. The coup failed but created a sense of insecurity and prevented North Korea from joining the Chinese experiments too enthusiastically. Hence the Ch’ollima-Movement of 1958 was reminiscent of the work-harder-campaigns in the Soviet Union and Europe and not of the much more extreme Great Leap Forward, despite similar terminology. The Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966 was not accompanied by any comparable event in North Korea. However, around that time, the chuch’i was developed into the indigenous form of North Korean socialist ideology, declaring North Korea’s ideological independence from both Beijing and Moscow.

Marxist or Leninist ideas about socialism shaped the image of a socialist society in East Asia since the successful October Revolution in Russia. But, very similar to Neoconfucianism centuries before, only a few intellectuals fully understood these relatively complex thoughts. The vast majority of undereducated, underprivileged farmers, workers, and guerrilla fighters conceived the concepts in a very rough and simplified form. The ambitious and self-confident leaders, such as Mao Zedong and later Kim Il Sung, deliberately altered these foreign thoughts to make them fit the realities of their own societies. This included, but was not limited to, the substitution of “working class” (a key concept for Marx) with “masses,” a much more flexible term that would be applied to the farmers in these underdeveloped countries.

This “creative” application of Marx’s theory has not been confined to China and North Korea; in fact, Lenin was the first leader who made theory fit the reality of his country. But the old terms were kept for a long time, leading to considerable confusion about what “socialism” actually is. Again, Kornai provides a very useful reference point. Combining the logic of economics with the reality of socialism, he has identified a few key characteristics that despite all diversity are necessary and sufficient to describe a socialist society. They include the undivided power monopoly of the Communist Party, a dominant ideology, state ownership in the economy, and central bureaucratic coordination. The details, such as names of the parties or of the ideologies, differ, but the essence remains the same, and so do the consequences.

Not everybody agrees with such a position. The modifications to socialism in individual countries are seen as so profound that they prompted an academic discussion about socialism as such, asking whether we shouldn’t rather speak about various kinds of socialisms. We will not indulge in such a debate here, but it is helpful to be aware that the question of what socialism means has not finally been answered. We avoid the related controversy by using North Korea itself as a reference point. When we argue that North Korea is returning to orthodox socialist positions, we refer primarily to North Korean socialist conservatism as it emerged since the late 1950s until the early 1960s in response to the events as mentioned above, in particular the Korean War experience, the 1956 Party Congress, and the emerging Sino-Soviet split that posed a serious challenge to North Korea. Orthodox socialism in North Korea combines elements of Stalinist, strong defensive nationalism, xenophobia, and Neo-Confucian traditions. This type of socialism could be observed until the death of Kim Il Sung and the beginning of the famine in the mid-1990s.

In the economic sphere, this includes central planning and central coordination, state ownership of means of production, a focus on heavy and chemical industry at the cost of light industry, the logic of “big is beautiful,” and a preference for investing into production versus consumption. In such an environment, money usually plays a secondary role, and individuals adjust their behavior in a way that makes them much less sensitive to price changes than their peers in market economies. All economic activities are controlled and coordinated by the state; private trading and production that could serve as an alternative source of power or ways of upward social mobility do not exist or are severely limited.

In the political sphere, there is the undisputed power monopoly of the Communist Party, in the case of North Korea, the Korean Worker’s Party (KWP). An important feature is that the political system of North Korea is (still) leader-based. The Party as such plays the role of supporter of the supreme leader. Unlike most other socialist countries, in North Korea the Party apparatus itself has little real power over top-level decisions. In the Soviet Union, in its satellite countries, and even in China, the Politburo (or its Standing Committee) yielded real power. Party Congresses were convened regularly to disseminate new strategies and to consolidate internal organs of power, such as the Central Committee. Power struggles took place within the elite over control of the Party. In North Korea, socialism could be maintained despite the absence of a Party Congress since 1980 (!) because the KWP plays a much less decisive role as a subject; it is reduced to the status of an object and an instrument, although it is as such still a very powerful one.

In the ideological sphere, socialist countries usually present a monolithic model as discussed above. In North Korea, socialist ideology is particularly closely interwoven with nationalism. In fact, nationalism is the dominant element, which is why the North Koreans have shown a
remarkable lack of sensitivity when meddling with the core principles of socialism in a Marxist-Leninist sense (discussed below). Jorganson therefore appropriately described *chu[d]e* as “country-specific ethnic nationalism” (not socialism).\textsuperscript{15} Again, North Korea is not alone in this respect; however, here we find a major difference to the satellite states in Eastern Europe, which had to be careful not to offend the Soviet Union by overly nationalist tendencies. It is also helpful to remember that, in orthodox socialist theory, socialism and nationalism are mutually exclusive concepts. Class by definition reaches across state and national boundaries; common interests are based on common class, not on common ancestry, culture, or tradition. Few socialist systems could hence afford to publish statements such as “our party puts forth the army, not the working class, as the leading force of our revolution,” or “the nation is over class and stratum, and the fatherland is more important than idea and ideology,” and walk away with it.\textsuperscript{16}

**Socialist Neoconservatism in Ideology**

Reform according to Kornai means that one or more of the basic characteristics of a socialist system are changed deeply and lastingly.\textsuperscript{17} China has shown that it is possible to eliminate state ownership and bureaucratic coordination and to replace the dominant ideology with patriotism, while still maintaining the power monopoly of the Party. For a few years, it seemed that North Korea would try to follow a similar path.\textsuperscript{18}

However, since around 2005 and increasingly since 2008 the North Korean leadership has been trying to turn back the wheel of time. Today we see a complete reversal of the policies of 2000–2004. In January 2001, Kim Jong Il wrote in the *Rodong Sinmun* that “Things are not what they used to be in the 60s. So no one should follow the way people used to do things in the past.”\textsuperscript{19} However, in March 2009, during a field guidance, he declared that officials should “energetically lead the masses by displaying the same work style as the officials did in the 50s and 60s.”\textsuperscript{20} Within a few years, he had come full circle.

A single quote is, of course, not enough to prove such a major ideological reversal. A more precise way to quantify ideological developments is an analysis of official North Korean media, such as the publications by Korea Central News Agency.\textsuperscript{21} The Internet presence of this source is based in Japan and used as a tool of propaganda specifically for Koreans in Japan and South Koreans, but it reproduces articles by North Korean media such as *Rodong Sinmun* and *Minju Chosön*. As such, it is genuine and provides a glance at the development of official ideology in the DPRK. One example is the utilization of the terms “socialism,” “chu[d]e,” and “son’gun” by North Korean state media. As Graph 1.1 below shows, their appearance has doubled (!) between 2004 and 2009 (n = about 1,200 in each period).

This graph is based on the English-language edition of the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) Web site. It is interesting to see that the term *son’gun* (or “military first”) has only been used since 2003, while in the Korean version it first appeared in 1999. This suggests a certain connection to the reforms, although the menacing term suggests otherwise.\textsuperscript{22} But myth-building has already started. Current propaganda claims that its roots can be found during Kim Il Sung’s anti-Japanese campaign, that is, in the 1930s. In March 2009, KCNA reported about a newly published book that divides Kim Jong Il’s *son’gun* leadership into five stages: (1) When Kim Jong Il grew up between 1942 and August of 1960; (2) when Kim Jong Il actively promoted the *son’gun* revolutionary cause of Kim Il Sung from August 1960 to June 1982; (3) when Kim Jong Il further developed the *son’gun* politics in depth, defended Korean-style socialism, and gave full play to its advantages and vitality from June 1982 to December 1994; (4) when Kim Jong Il enforced the *son’gun* politics in all fields, thus overcoming grave difficulties from January 1995 to December 1998; and (5) when he pushed...
forward the cause of building a great prosperous and powerful socialist nation through the general advance of the sŏn’gum revolution from January 1999 until the present time.

As mentioned above, socialism in North Korea is connected to nationalism. This is reflected in the term “our [Korea-] style socialism” (urisik sahoejuni). It has been used in only less than five KCNA articles in the last quarters of 2001 and 2002, but the number rose to over twenty-five in 2006 and jumped to more than thirty in the first quarter of 2009. The development goal, dubbed kangsŏng taeguk, has been supplemented by the term “socialist” and is now again called sahoejuni kangsŏng taeguk (socialist prosperous and strong great country). This term has witnessed an even more obvious intensification, not being mentioned even in a single KCNA article in the last quarter of 2002 but jumping to over one hundred in the same period of 2008 and two hundred in the first quarter of 2009.

In late 2007, a decades-old slogan reemerged that had already been criticized back in the late 1950 by East German diplomats: “Let us produce, study and live like the anti-Japanese guerrillas!” (saenggando haksŏpdo saengdeoldo hang’ilgyogyŏkdaesigŏ). Among the newly emerging old buzzwords are “single-minded unity” (ilsintan’gyŏl), “collectivism” (chipamjun’gu), “self-reliance” (charyŏkkangnaeng), and “mental power” (chŏngsinryŏk). The North Korean media increasingly quote older, more conservative articles of Kim Jong II, most of which deal with chuch’e and the leading role of the Party. Also notable is the connection between sŏn’gum and chuch’e. We witness a reinterpretation of sŏn’gum, possibly in preparation for the post-Kim Jong II period. Rather than an ad hoc measure to cope with the difficult situation of the late 1990s, it is increasingly transformed into a timeless ideology along with chuch’e.

Conservatism in North Korea, too, goes hand in hand with traditionalism. On October 29, 2007, Rodong Sinmun emphasized that the chuch’e idea means “believing in people as in heaven.” This is not a new expression, nevertheless it provides another interesting parallel to Korea’s past. Supporting the notion of a partial return to even pre-socialist traditions is the reintroduction of a Confucian holiday on April 4, 2008, when for the first time in North Korean history Chŏngmyŏng (tomb sweeping day) was officially celebrated. This is remarkable because it reflects the readiness of the leadership to openly embrace traditional concepts to support both the nationalist agenda and ideas of filial piety. The latter is directly related to the two leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong II. In April 2007, Rodong Sinmun carried a short article reminding its readers of Chŏngmyŏng and its old meaning, especially tending to the graves of ancestors. Chusŏk, the Korean equivalent to thanksgiving and the most important holiday in South Korea, was covered by Rodong Sinmun on September 14, 2008 as a “folk holiday,” continuing the reintegration of traditional customs into ideologically and politically correct life in North Korea. Chusŏk had been reintroduced as a public holiday only in 2003, fourteen years after the rehabilitation of the Lunar New Year in 1989. In this respect, North Korea clearly deviates from what we would typically expect to be orthodox socialist positions, that is, the condemnation of religion as “superstition” and “opium for the people.” In North Korea, folk traditions are used to reinforce nationalism and hence are acceptable.

An excellent example to quantify the changed paradigms in North Korea is a look at the titles used for Kim Jong II. As Graph 1.2 shows, in the period of roughly 2000–2005, he was mainly addressed by the “worldly” title “Great Leader” (widaehan ryŏngdoja). Since 2006, there has been a sudden drop in the frequency of “leader,” and instead we note a sharp increase in the use of the “religious” title “General Secretary” (dh’ongpisŏ).

This is a clear sign that the period of pragmatic reform is over and marks the return to a renewed focus on ideological rigidity and purity.
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