

Washington DC Peace & Security Forum: “A Score Card: The First Three Years of Kim Jong Un’s Rule”

William Selig
December 17, 2014



Washington DC, USA - A forum on “A Score Card: The First Three Years of Kim Jong Un’s Rule,” took place Dec. 17, 2014, at the Office of Peace and Security Affairs in Washington, D.C. The conclusion, based on a dynamic presentation and discussion led by Dr. Alexandre Mansourov, North Korean expert and professor at the U.S.-Korea Institute —“Surprisingly significant.”

Domestic score card: The regime is stable, the system is resilient, and the economy is better today than it was three years ago. There is no question that the system of governance in Kim Jong Un’s North Korea is still one-man rule. There is no second-in-command there. Anyone who has tried to assert him- or herself as the second-in-command was cut down in size and eliminated time and again. The North Korean economy is doing better today than three years ago. Reasons may include: (1) growing trade with China and Russia; (2) three years of good harvest; (3) increased domestic construction; (4) increased production of fertilizer; (5) increasing electricity production; (6) consumption “boom” in Pyongyang and in the provincial cities; and, (7) a growing middle class.

International score card: North Korea has been pursuing an emboldened foreign policy including a reengagement with Japan, expanding trade with China, and rebuilding its traditional ties and partnership with Russia. Regarding South Korea, whether the North has given up on the Park Geun-hye administration remains to be seen. As the South Korean presidential term comes to an end in 2018, some experts predict that Seoul will be increasingly desperate to achieve some progress with the North. The same goes for the Obama administration, which ends in 2017. The U.S. administration may likewise become determined to show some progress for Obama’s two terms of office. The bottom line is that in the past three years, Kim Jong Un has proved to be a survivor, basically using the power of the North Korean system skillfully to his political advantage.

All of the above should be understood against the backdrop that most North Korean experts in the U.S. and South Korea did not even allow the possibility that he would take over, and once he did, they dismissed the possibility that he would stay around for more than a year or two. Now that the three-year mourning period is over, Kim Jong Un is likely to unveil a series of new social-economic policy initiatives and possibly to make some adjustments in the structure of the North Korean system of government, just like it was done by his father who also waited three years after the death of Kim Il Sung before instituting any policy changes and adjustments in the system of governance.

Welcoming the participants, Dr. Antonio Betancourt, Director of the Office of Peace and Security Affairs, UPF International, Washington, D.C., said three years have passed since Kim Jong Il died on this very date, Dec. 17, and his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, succeeded him as ruler of North Korea. Today marks the official end of the mourning period for Kim Jong Il. Could the fourth year of Kim Jong Un’s leadership present the possibility of a start of a new era in North-South and U.S.-DPRK relations,

considering the recent unilateral release of three American captives and the visit to Pyongyang by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper — or is “there enough evidence to hold Kim Jong Un accountable for massive human rights atrocities comparable to the Nazi-era,” as charged by UN human rights investigator Marzuki Darusman?

Dr. Betancourt put forth a set of questions for the forum. “What has Kim Jong Un accomplished in three years? What has he failed to accomplish? What will he need to do for the future? What are the assessments of inter-Korean relations, and bilateral relations with China, Russia, Japan, and the U.S.? Lastly, what possible innovative solutions will break the logjam in North-South relations, including proposals for a summit between Kim Jong Un and President Park Geun-hye by the 70th anniversary of liberation from Japan next August?”



We offer the following excerpts from Dr. Mansourov, one of the world's leading experts on North Korea (DPRK):

Let me start by giving you my bottom line up front. The regime is stable, the system is resilient, and, believe it or not, the North Korean economy is better today than it was three years ago. The North Korean people have a better life today than they did three years ago when Kim Jong Il died.

There is no question in my mind that we have to deal with one-man rule in North Korea, it is the rule of Kim Jong Un. He is the decider, the modernizer, the commander-in-chief, and the architect-in-chief. He is the person who makes the decisions in North Korea. There is no second-in-command. Anyone who tried to assert him- or herself as a second-in-command was cut down in size and eliminated time and again. I regard all senior officials around Kim Jong Un as basically the pawns of the supreme leader.

There is no collective leadership in North Korea, and no matter what other people may tell you, the people around him can only give him advice. Hence, we have the system of collective advice, but not collective leadership.

Kim Jong Un was able to solidify and consolidate the “unified guidance system” where all reports are directed to him. He maintains control over the country through the key institutions — the party, the military and the security services. Over the past three years, we observed a visible shift from the “Military-First” (Songun) policy, as practiced by his father Kim Jong Il, to the so-called Pyongjin Line, i.e., the strategic course on parallel construction of the economy and nuclear weapons.

We still have to deal with essentially the family-based regime and take into account the first family politics. We saw how ruthless Kim Jong Un could be. He eliminated people perceived as mounting a political challenge to him, those who sought to muscle away the power he had inherited from his father. Jang Song Thaek, his powerful uncle who was married to the only daughter of Kim Il Sung, and was in the shadow of Kim Jong Il for almost 40 years. He did everything to amass his power, including setting up his own private cabinet, his own party within the party, his own security force, and his own reporting line (guidance system) that was meant to enable him to run the country on his own. But, Jang failed to consolidate his power, and, in the end, Kim Jong Un took him out.

Let me make my position clear. Most people say, “What a horrible human being Kim Jong Un is! He took out his own uncle. How could he do that?!” In my opinion, Jang’s purge was an act of courage on Kim’s part. Why? Because Jang Song Thaek was a horrible man. His hands were drenched in blood. He was in charge of the North Korean gulag. As the director of the Administrative Department of the WPK Central Committee, he supervised the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of People’s Security, and other principal organizations within the North Korean repressive apparatus. He was the person who signed all execution orders and all the torture orders. He was the North Korean analogue of Stalin’s henchman, Lavrenti Beria, who was chief of the secret police apparatus and administered the Soviet Gulag. Everybody in North Korea knew Jang Song Thaek was a frightening human being. With his removal, North Korean citizens no longer have to live in the fear of arbitrary executions and prosecutions.

In the past three years, Kim Jong Un step-by-step dismantled the guardianship system created by Kim Jong Il to ease his son’s way to power: he removed Vice Marshal Ri Yong Ho, Jang Song Thaek, and others. He has solidified his position as the supreme leader by surrounding himself with the people he trusts, including party secretary Choe Ryong-hae and his younger sister Kim Yo Jong, who was recently appointed as vice director of the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee’s Propaganda and Agitation Department.



Domestic score card

The North Korean economy is doing better today than three years ago. Because it’s not a transparent system, it’s hard to know why. Three years of good harvests may be a factor, increased civilian consumption, residential construction boom, growing domestic production of fertilizer, a loosening of the strictures of collectivized agriculture, growing number of foreign tourists, increased electricity production. There is a construction boom in Pyongyang and in the provincial cities, business, residential apartments, and roads.

The North Korean economy is recovering slowly. It is also due to the growing trade with China. Despite all the political difficulties, trade with China remains on the uptrend. China is North Korea’s most important ally and trading partner as well as the primary source of arms, energy, and food. In 2013, trade between the two countries grew by more than 10% from 2012 levels to \$6.5 billion. A lot of it is not being reported. The economic recovery and social development in North Korea should not be compared to that in South Korea or the West; the benchmark used is the conditions that existed three years ago inside North Korea.

At the same time, North Korea continues research and development work on its nuclear and missile capabilities. They’re spending more on the development of nuclear weapons and missiles. In that sense, their capabilities must be getting better and more sophisticated. Whether the Pyongjin Line of parallel

economic construction and nuclear armament is sustainable in the long run nobody knows, but in the past three years it has been working.

The middle class is growing. Obviously, new technology is spreading in North Korea. Generational change is under way and it's accelerating. These may be the sources for the new policy initiatives in the years to come.

That said, the regime is still very rigid and paranoid. The country continues to be very much isolated, despite increased economic exchanges with China and improved relationships with Russia. Isolation, the oppressive apparatus, the fear and paranoia of the outside world, as well as the regime's ideological rigidity are all major obstacles to change.

Looking into the future, now that the three-year mourning period is over, I expect Kim Jong Un to unveil a series of new political initiatives and social-economic policy measures, just like his father did in 1998, three years after Kim Il Sung's death,



Foreign policy score card

We observe that Kim Jong Un's government has been pursuing an emboldened foreign policy in the past three years. North Korea is rebuilding its traditional partnership with Russia. It has reengaged with Japan. It is basically maintaining a steady economic cooperation with China, despite the fact that the political dialogue is lagging behind.

The question whether the North has given up on the Park Geun-hye administration remains to be seen. Some people say they have given up on her. Others say no. As her presidential term draws to a close by 2018, the North Koreans may try to knock on Seoul's door once again in the belief that President Park will be increasingly desperate to achieve some progress with the North and with the hope that they can squeeze more concessions from the South. As she becomes more politically vulnerable at home, they will try to raise the price of cooperation.

North Korea continues to threaten the U.S. with nuclear arms, missiles, and cyber weapons.

Have they given up on the Obama presidency? Probably, yes. They may have decided to wait him out or they may try one more time to squeeze some concessions from the United States at the last minute before President Obama leaves office in 2017.

The bottom line is in the past three years Kim Jong Un has proved to be a survivor, basically using the power of the North Korean system skillfully to his political advantage.

This should be understood against the backdrop that most North Korean experts did not even allow the possibility that he would take over and once he did, they dismissed the possibility that he was to stay around for a few years. He keeps beating our expectations.

Look at recent events surrounding the President's new Cuba policy. This marks the beginning of the end of the communist regime in Cuba because what held the Castro brothers in power for so long was the U.S. embargo and isolation of them. Within five years, there won't be any communist regime in Cuba. The floodgates have been opened.

North Korea's biggest fear has never been a nuclear threat from the U.S. What the North Korean leaders probably fear the most is the prospect of the Allies' lifting all embargoes and sanctions, and re-engaging Pyongyang across the border on all accounts and opening up the North because, if that were to happen, then the Kim regime would lose the rationale for its existence. It will not be able to withstand that kind of influx of Western ideas, capital, and technology.

Let's hope that the President still has some political capital left to dramatically change his policy towards North Korea in the same way he reversed the decades-long U.S. policy towards Cuba. I'm pessimistic to be honest, especially after his Dec. 19th declaration that North Korea was responsible for the cyber attack against Sony Pictures, but the fact that he reversed the half-century old U.S. policy towards Cuba raises my hopes that something like this could be done with respect to North Korea, too. In my judgment, that would be the beginning of the end of the North Korean regime. Nothing else will work. Increasing international sanctions and isolation, dragging Pyongyang through the mud at the United Nations and ICC will not work. Sanctions and embargoes did not work for the past 60 years. If you keep doing the same thing time and again, why would you expect to see different results? You won't. The U.S. North Korea policy is no exception."



Discussion points

The UN human rights ruling to refer North Korea to the ICC in The Hague for possible charges of "crimes against humanity." In response, North Korean diplomats met a UN human rights investigator in late October. According to Dr. Mansourov, the North's agreement to take part in the meeting was unexpected and took the West by surprise. "My position is that we have to engage them in a conversation on human rights. Let's talk about it. We have to be specific and tell them our concerns. In the past, they refused to talk to us but now they want to talk to us. They're saying "these are just ordinary prisoners. We know our prison conditions are primitive, but we don't have the money to keep them up. These are not political prisoners." I think the burden is on us to keep pushing them to allow us to go in and verify what they're telling us - whether it is true or not. My impression is that they are responding differently to our human rights initiatives today. "When the North Koreans say they want to be part of the discussion on their human rights at the United Nations, but the Western nations tell them 'no,' this is a mistake. The West thinks Pyongyang is bluffing. Instead of shutting them out, the West should use that as an opportunity at the high level to tell them what the Western countries think about their human rights record and to listen to the North Korean point of view."

Nuclear and missile capabilities - Research and development work continues unabated and that includes their work on the militarization of the nuclear devices making them lighter, more precise, and more diversified. They continue to accumulate fissile material. They haven't tested a nuclear device for the

fourth time despite threatening to do so a few weeks ago. They keep testing rocket engines, important missile components, and this year alone they fired 111 medium-range missiles and short-range missiles 19 times, so clearly it's a very active testing program.

The charm offensive - The charm offensive will continue with this young leader who wants to go out in the world and present North Korea differently and resolve some of the outstanding issues. "Next year, we'll see further movement. The first trip I expect to be to Russia. Vladimir Putin has already invited Kim Jong Un to Moscow to mark the USSR's victory over Nazi Germany on May 9. This would be Kim's first foreign visit. Putin may return the visit to North Korea on August 15 because it will be the 70th anniversary of the Korean liberation from Japan."

Japanese abductees - Japanese and North Korean officials held talks in Pyongyang in October regarding the Japanese citizens who were abducted in the 1970s and 80s. Japan believes hundreds were abducted and some may still be alive. Dr. Mansourov says Kim Jong Un wants to see this issue resolved. "He wasn't even born when it happened. He wants to give them back. Once that is done, he wants to be sure that the Japanese will not change their mind. He's looking for ways to structure a deal with the Japanese in such a way that they won't be able to walk away from cooperation under some other excuse (nuclear, missile, human rights, etc.) once they get what they want from Pyongyang on the abductees issue. He doesn't feel any personal responsibility for the abductions problem. He has given orders to his diplomats to go out and explain the North's position and resolve the issue. His orders are "Cooperate as much as we can and try to resolve this problem once and for all."

Divided families - Unfortunately, time is not on our side. Although tens of thousands of people still have relatives in the North, their numbers are dwindling rapidly. By all accounts, in 10 years, there will be no living members of the families that were divided at liberation and during the Korean War on the peninsula. The idea that two Koreas still represent one country because they are united in blood but separated only by ideology will lose ground. There will be no direct blood ties between two Koreas anymore. In essence, only one or two more presidents of the Republic of Korea will have the opportunity to resolve this historical problem and put an end to this long-lasting tragedy of the Korean nation.



Conclusion

Speculation about North Korea has become a routine sport. The reclusive country and tightly controlled media and people continue to worry our government and the experts. But the facts remain, in comparison to three years ago, the North Korean regime is today stable. Kim Jong Un is firmly in command. The economy is recovering and the people are accepting of the legitimacy of his rule and the current status quo. There is no possibility of a coup by the military. North Korea is a resourceful country with a resilient system. On the international arena, the country will be stronger and more assertive in the years ahead. How should the U.S. and the West respond? Should we follow a policy of engagement or isolation? In the

view of our speaker and participants, in order to bring about positive change, regime change should not be the objective. Sanctions have not worked for 61 years because North Korea exists in an economic and political world separated from the West. Senior North Korean officials have repeatedly told outsiders that Kim Jong Un will be around for the long term and it is incumbent on the U.S. (as well as Japan and South Korea) to find ways and be open to opportunities to engage them in the international community.

“A Score Card: The First Three Years of Kim Jong Un’s Rule,” Dec. 17, 2014

Host: Dr. Antonio Betancourt, Director, Office of Peace and Security Affairs, UPF-Washington, DC

Moderator: Dr. Alexandre Y. Mansourov, Adjunct Professor of Korean Studies, U.S.-Korea Institute, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, US

Attendees:

Byoung-sam Koo, Embassy of Korea

John Kukor, Former Intelligence Officer, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Taegwank Kwon, Embassy of Korea

Yoshihiro Makino, U.S.-Korea Institute, SAIS

Michael Marshall, Global Peace Foundation

Thomas McDevitt, Chairman, The Washington Times

Michelle Miller, U.S.-Korea Institute, SAIS

Sinae Kim, Embassy of Korea

Jason West, The North Korea Network

Hongliang Zhang, Embassy of P.R. China

Lester Johnson, Washington Avenue Inter, LLC

Harry Bindal, American Society of Engineers of Indian Origin

Douglas Burton, Assistant to the Chairman, The Washington Times

Tomiko Duggan, Director of Public Affairs, UPF-Washington, DC

Prof. Diane Falk, Research writer and editor

Shaquille James, Georgetown University

Katrina Johnson, 90 for Life

Cherry Ngoc Nguyen, student

Dr. Mark P. Barry, Advisor, Office of Peace and Security Affairs, UPF-Washington, DC (via Skype)

Dr. William Selig, Deputy Director, Office of Peace and Security Affairs, UPF-Washington, DC