The Situation on the Korean Peninsula. Part 2

The author is continuing his series of articles to improve our understanding of the situation on the Korean Peninsula: • How North Korea and the West view each other and how much they both distrust and misunderstand each other; • North Korea’s current system, and the extent to which its new leader increases or decreases its stability; • How North Korea’s relations with China and Russia will evolve; • The extent to which chance can increase the likelihood of war. You can find the first part of the article by the following link.

A peek behind the iron curtain

North Korea has blinders on, too, and its experts on the West (in the broad sense of the term) do not necessarily understand things about it that seem obvious to us. They are governed by an eccentric dogma and are largely forced to respond to external stimuli in a certain way. In addition, tunnel vision makes it difficult for them to make non-routine decisions. In general, when we ask, “Why didn’t they do THAT?” the question might more properly have been worded, “Why didn’t they realize that they should have done THAT?” Did they have an opportunity to learn about THAT and understand that it was what they needed to do?

Let me explain that point with a story about the formal economic education that cadres receive. Most study in the Kim Il-sung University’s department of political economics, where they are trained in a mixture of Juche and 1960s-era Soviet political economics. And no one is going to fail a senior official’s son. A smaller number studies abroad — primarily in China (Shenyang); some, however, study in the United States, Canada, France or Switzerland. But they are the few of the few, and I have heard that the reforms ended in the summer of 2012 because there was no one to put them into practice. The old cadres simply did not know or did not understand what to do.

It is not so much that the iron curtain does not permit adequate information about the outside world from being acquired than that it is not adequately analyzed. First of all, the more closed a society is, the fewer people there are who are allowed to spend time outside it, especially long periods of time. However, a small number of professionals is just as incapable of creating an extensive data network as a large number with little knowledge of reality.

Second, the people who analyze the data and draw conclusions from it are usually those who have not been outside the country. Therefore, their interpretation will be somewhat biased. And that carries over to a third factor: the idea that intelligence reports are always accurate. Likewise, it is untrue that the military and politicians make decisions based on intelligence data or after consulting intelligence professionals.

This clearly allows North Korean diplomats to say “no” to their enemy and steadfastly resist underhanded schemes, but it provides no understanding of an opponent’s internal logic.

Let’s also consider North Korean society from a generational standpoint. North Korea’s leadership includes people from Kim Il-sung’s generation (those 80 and older), Kim Jong-il’s generation (60-70) and 30-year-old Kim Jong-un, who lacks a team of contemporaries.

Of course, people born in the 1930s are not the guerrilla fighters but the children of the guerrilla fighters who grew up under the influence of people with a similar worldview. These are people who survived in the country’s most
depressed and impoverished region, an area that makes Khabarovsk look like a paradise. They are people who either experienced napalm and carpet bombing firsthand or saw it with their own eyes. The Korean War is part of their personal history, and the feeling that the country is actually under threat is firmly ingrained in them.

The next generation, those born in the 1950s, also have a personal history that includes the Korean War, and nothing can erase it. Their opinions were formed at a time when there was less freedom of thought and more autarchy. As a result, the “gerontocracy” has life experiences that cause them to perceive the United States as evil incarnate, with which it is impossible and useless to negotiate. They are also emotionally inclined to exaggerate the strength of the United States, and they are convinced that in the event of war the United States would employ nuclear weapons against North Korea because it came close to doing so in the Korean War.

I should also address their understanding of independence, which was a kind of obsession for Kim Il-sung’s generation. Those who grew up during the struggle with factions and then had to engage in foreign liberation actions understand very well that “he who pays the fiddler calls the tune.” Then there was what happened in 1956, after which they realized that independence, meaning not even a hint of groveling before their senior partner, is more important than any political and economic aid that can be obtained through closer cooperation as a “vassal.” They saw support for autarchy as the solution: If we’re tough and invincible, not even an ally’s betrayal can hurt us. The economy’s chief product is military security; everything else is secondary.

Imposed on this is the way old people think and act. It is unclear how well the aged are able to respond adequately to contemporary challenges and avoid underrating modern technologies, including social technologies.

Here, we might ask: “But what about Kim Jong-un?” After all, he is young, he studied in Europe, and he ought to be a sensible person with fewer blinders on. Unfortunately, there are a number of reasons why we should avoid overestimating the young leader’s importance.

First, the idea that a head of state is always an autocratic leader capable of exerting unlimited influence on a country’s policy and completely controlling the bureaucracy is a fallacy. His status as head of state does not let him move his country in just ANY direction. Rather, it is like skiing on a steep slope where it is possible to maneuver but impossible to make a 90-degree turn or, especially, go back up the hill. And if a ruler has no team of like-minded people able to ensure that his ideas are implemented locally, they will simply not be put into practice no matter how interesting and worthy his innovations are.

Second, it is not entirely clear how relations between the young leader and the old generals are developing. There will likely be a misunderstanding that follows the classic pattern in which a young person better understands the needs of the time and the strategy required but lacks sufficient administrative experience to make the right tactical decisions and avoid turning the established procedure on its head with his initiatives that derive in part from the new broom syndrome.

In this traditional society, Kim Jong-un will at least have to listen to his elders and will be unable to make a decision that completely ignores their advice. That means he may turn out to be more receptive to adopting their model of the world, which is based on the principle that toughness must be answered with greater toughness, that no one is to be trusted and that they must rely only on themselves.

Third, as yet we know little about Kim Jong-un. Youth does not always mean reform, and a Western education does not constitute blind commitment. Pol Pot also studied in Paris and supposedly even saw Sartre while he was alive.

Kim Jong-un’s enthronement gave rise to various expectations, but most experts believe we should expect no radical departures from the course set by his father. For now, in fact, the new leader’s policy remains consistent with his father’s strategies.

However, there are at least two distinct points to consider. First of all, Kim Jong-il was an old and trusted partner with a reserve/margin of trust (which is important for an understanding of my next article, so pay attention!). The young Kim has no such reserve.

Second, it is unclear how much administrative experience and political acumen the son has. Kim Jong-il’s policies were very complex and required fine maneuvering and an understanding of when he needed to show his teeth and when he needed to take a step back. That correlated well with Kim Jong-il’s nature. He was a pragmatist, a rationalist and an introvert. Kim Jong-un apparently is different and psychologically resembles his grandfather more than his father. So the question is, how well can he listen to his elders and not go too far? Especially in a situation where he is being tested.
It will also be interesting to see the extent to which Kim Jong-un possesses his father’s combativeness. Kim Jong-il’s biography is well known, and his relationship with his uncle and stepmother were difficult: His ascent was not as certain as it now seems. Kim Jong-un has lived a life of luxury. Therefore, I do not know whether he has gone through the school of hard knocks like his father, whether he has had to cultivate the characteristics a crisis manager at that level needs, and whether he will work as hard, constantly traveling around the country and sleeping 4-5 hours a day.

And if he does not, there could be two types of consequences. First, will the regional authorities be able to think for themselves and not simply carry out the leader’s wishes? They will either simply await instructions, or they will make decisions to the extent their own bias and competence are subordinate to their leader. Second, this situation would naturally lead to a loosening of oversight, because a loss of feedback would cause the young leader to be convinced that things are not so bad.

In comparison with the old guard, of course, the young Kim looks like an excellent expert on contemporary society, but it would be difficult for an older person to change his views overnight. This means that even if Kim Jong-un’s associates actually agree that a new policy is needed, it cannot happen instantaneously. Also, if the son does not completely fill his father’s shoes as the nerve center and control system, it is entirely possible that they will begin making bad tactical and strategic decisions (for example, they may not respond adequately to a provocation by the other side).

So in the end what do we have? Just as the United States is largely blind when it comes to North Korea, scraping by with satellite photography or secondary sources, their North Korean opponents have no idea about the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain, especially outside Northeast Asia. To them, the United States is also a Mordor, and in contrast to American experts they know it from personal experience.

Therefore, without the involvement of an authoritative third party that will push North Korea and the United States toward a consensus, the wall of basic misunderstanding between them will grow higher when the other side sees a “Mordor from another world” instead of an America or North Korea. That kind of wall is a terrible obstacle to consensus, because you are actually talking not with the person but with your image of the person, and you cannot change it.

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