

## **The Logic of the North Korean Dictatorship**

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### *1. A dictatorship, but what kind?*

In this paper I use my way of thinking about dictatorship, developed in my 1998 book, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, and elsewhere, to “model” the North Korean regime. As all dictatorships do, the North Korean regime stays in power through repression. Indeed, it appears to be a particularly repressive regime, as evidenced by the ban on any organized political opposition, the closed media, curbs on freedom of speech of any kind and the “sprawling” penal system. But like any dictatorship which survives, and this one has survived for over 60 years, it cannot function on the basis of political repression alone. Originally, it was totalitarian, with Soviet style central planning, and an emphasis on heavy industry. Loyalty was fostered by the Korean Workers Party, with its institutions to encourage loyalty, and citizens were classified in the 1950’s into three kinds: “core”, “wavering” and “hostile” based on family background. Later this was expanded to 51 groups, including 29 distinct hostile groups, e.g., families of peasants, individuals with clear religious identities, returning Chinese and Japanese Koreans, etc.

A regime like this is *stable*. The regime maximizes power, and it has a set of Communist-style institutions which monopolize political power and incentivize the population to be loyal to it.

Until the 1980’s or so, at least according to official figures, North Korea’s economic performance was comparable to South Korea’s. But the triple shock of the early 1990’s: (the collapse of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, China’s turn towards capitalism, and South Korea’s economic takeoff) produced a collapse in the economy and presumably a fall in loyalty towards the regime. And there was a succession crisis when Kim Il Sung died in 1994. To shore up his power under these conditions, Kim Jong Il brought the military into the governance of the regime.

In general, military regimes have a comparative advantage at repression, and can raise it at lower cost than could a civilian regime. But the military is a closed hierarchy, with its own codes of behaviour, networks, and ways of doing things. This has two consequences: 1) Since career opportunities for military personnel outside the army, navy, etc. are limited, military bureaus, unlike others, tend to be budget maximizers, and indeed military dictatorships have famously expanded the budget of the military whenever they have taken power. 2) Military regimes do not easily tolerate civilian participation, and few military regimes have built mass parties.

This implies a paradox: military regimes tend to be *unstable*. Initially, they survive by raising repression, but as budget maximizers, they also raise military budgets and the salaries of military personnel. Raising some military salaries and not others also

engenders jealousy and further pressure for wage increases from those who have not been favoured. But these increases means the price of repression rises, since a large part of this price is made up of military salaries. So in the process of rewarding their supporters, the military act to destroy their own comparative advantage at governing! Put another way, they tend to sow the seeds of their own destruction.

Normally the solution for a military regime to these difficulties is to exit after a few years, and turn power over to civilians, having obtained guarantees against prosecution and protection for their military budget, as many military dictators in Latin America did in the 1970s', the heyday of military rule in recent times.

The North Korean solution was different, and unique: militarize the entire society! Although the military had always played a prominent role in North Korea, Kim Jong Il went much further in 1995 with the introduction of *Songun*, or "military first politics" in which civilian institutions, including the Central People's Committee, were sidelined in order to assert the primacy of the Korean People's Army. North Korea today has the world's largest per capita army in the world: 1/5 of its working age population and the world's largest proportion of GNP devoted to military purposes. And to ensure a single source of authority for the military and society there is still the theocratic ideology of *juche*, greatly expanded by Kim Il Sung.

One can argue that there are external, defence- related reasons for militarization but the point here is that its basic logic was *internal*—i.e., to stabilize the regime against potential internal threats, not external ones.

## 2. *Does militarization help solve the economic or the political problem?*

The opposite would seem to be the case: With respect to the economy, central planning needs to be supplemented with informal supply sources —*blat* in Russian, *guanxi* in Chinese—to make up for the rigidities of the plan. But these informal adaptations are particularly incompatible with military values, because they break down the discipline which is key to a military hierarchy.

But there is once again a military solution to the economic problem: threats to other countries backed up by a powerful military, and especially the promotion of the nuclear weapons program—"nuclear blackmail"—to use Eberstadt's term-- to get foreign assistance.

Politically, we would expect "military first politics" to *amplify* the natural paranoia of dictators. Because the regime lives on the basis of external threats, it has to exaggerate the seriousness of these to justify the vast militarization of the society, and constant focus on these dangers means the leaders might themselves come to believe in their own warnings to the people.

## 3. *Is it stable?*

a). This source of instability due to the military constantly demanding more wages and more power is ever present, and can only be assuaged through constant feeding of the military appetite at the expense of promoting the civilian economy.

b) Neither the military nor central planning are good at managing the economy, and the marriage of the two in North Korea would seem to be worse than the sum of its parts. Yet, all around East Asia, especially in South Korea, people are getting rich while they are not. But the regime has boxed itself in with respect to opening up to the international economy.

c) Does this mean that a revolution like the Arab spring may be just around the corner? One problem is that immiserization does not produce revolution. Still, one can imagine a snowball of discontent occurring once it gets started, but there has to be some prospect of dissent for that to happen.

#### *4. Engagement or isolation?*

It is not obvious how the rest of the world can engage a regime like this which can be thought of as a marriage of three elements: totalitarianism, militarism and theocracy. *A priori*, each of these elements would seem to be relatively hard to engage compared to its counterpart regime: thus a totalitarian regime is less open to outside influence than a tinpot, a military regime is a closed hierarchy, and a theocratic regime responds only to God.

On the other hand, sanctions are unlikely to be effective without the cooperation of China and South Korea, which does not appear to be forthcoming, and the isolation of a “cult “ which the regime also resembles, just reinforces the capacity of the regime to attract the loyalty of its citizens.