

***Juche's* Role in North Korea's Foreign Policy**

**By**

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The often heard refrains “Kim Jong Il is irrational,” and “North Korea’s conduct is unpredictable” typify many political observers’ frustrations when deciphering North Korea’s responses to the outside world. Such expressions reveal more about those who utter them than about North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or DPRK). They are admissions of ignorance rooted in the assumption that North Korea’s leaders share the same views and priorities as outside observers

### *Juche as Political Culture*

The continuity and consistency of North Korea’s foreign policy is rooted in North Korea’s political culture, *Juche*, and gives it rationality and predictability. Kim Il Sung and his son’s reliance on a monolithic “political culture,” while alien to democratic societies beyond East Asia, recalls the Chinese dynasties’ and Korea’s Choson Dynasty’s (1492-1910) preference for Neo-Confucianism. Kim Il Sung formulated his “political culture” in terms of his subjects’ foremost desire – national reunification.

Given this preoccupation with reunification, we should reassess what Kim Il Sung originally meant by the word *juche*. The English translations of “self reliance” or “self determination” seem inconsistent with his focus on political rather than economic goals during the formative years of *Juche*. Kim Il Sung encountered Western political concepts as a young student in China where he learned about them by reading Chinese translations. Careful scrutiny of the Chinese characters he used to represent “*juche*” suggest a meaning very different from the one widely known outside North Korea. *Juche* consists of two Chinese characters: “*ju*” which basically means “rule” and “*che*” which has the basic meaning of “essence.” In the political context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “*ju*” suggested the World War I era Wilsonian concept of “self rule” or “self determination” for colonized people like Koreans. Combined with “*che*” (essence) we could translate “*juche*” as “essence of self determination.” This more closely reflects Kim’s original preoccupation with Korea’s political independence from Japan. It also more accurately focuses the Korean term on Kim’s long time championing of nationalism over Marxist-Leninist internationalism.

Kim Jong Il’s legitimacy rests on the three legged stool of: inheritance of his father’s authority, his father’s view of reality, *Juche*, and oversight of the military, *Son’gun chongji*. Kim Jong Il’s inheritance demonstrates respect for traditional Korea’s reverence for pedigree and prior preference for monarchy. Kim’s naming his father the “eternal” president observes filial piety, a highly cherished Confucian value. But Kim Jong Il could not, like his father, make any claims about military prowess. To compensate he assumed the title of “Supreme Commander,” elevated the National Defense Council to the highest administrative organ, designated himself its chairman, and proclaimed “*son’gun chongchj*” in 1998. These steps appear designed to cement the military’s loyalty to him by giving it priority in politics, policy and access to national resources.

*Juche* stands at the center of Kim Jong Il’s political trinity as explained in his treatise *On the Juche Idea*. Kim Jong Il’s treatise declares, “The *Juche* idea represents an invariable guiding idea of the Korean revolution ... we are confronted with the

honorable task of modeling the whole society on the *Juche* idea. Kim Jong Il clarifies that *Juche* is a departure from, not a reinterpretation of Marxism-Leninism.

The main imperialists are the United States and Japan, according to *Juche*. Success in the struggle against them requires several accomplishments beginning with arousing the masses' ideological consciousness. The propagation of *Juche* also "requires that national culture should be developed ..." because,

Koreans must know well Korean history, geography, economics, culture and the custom of the Korean nation, and in particular our Party's policy, its revolutionary history and revolutionary traditions. Only then will they be able to establish *Juche* and become true Korean patriots, the Korean communists." (*Ibid.*, p. 15)

### ***The Principles of Juche - Guidelines for Policy***

Kim Jong Il characterizes his "Principles of *Juche*" as being "... explicit fundamental principles which must be observed in successfully carrying out the revolution ...." The principles are:

*The Independent Stand Must be Maintained:* To maintain the nation's independence, "The leader laid down the principles of *Juche* in ideology, independence in politics, self-sufficiency in the economy and self-reliance in defense as the principles of realizing *Chajusong*."

*Juche in Ideology:* the "whole Party" (KWP) and the "whole society" are to be imbued with the "monolithic ideological system." This requires putting above all else an awareness and respect for Korea's unique qualities and peculiar conditions. Flunkeyism is to be avoided, particularly "servility to US "imperialism."

*Independence in Politics:* The goal is "upholding national independence and sovereignty of one's people, defending their interests and conducting politics by relying on them." Any "yielding to foreign pressure and tolerating foreign intervention in politics or acting at the instigation of others ...," must be avoided and "... it is imperative to exercise complete sovereignty and equality in foreign relations." "Sovereignty" is termed an "inviolable right," and foreign policy requires "strengthening the solidarity of the socialist countries and the international communist movement on the basis of opposing imperialism ..."

*Self-sufficiency in the Economy:* Kim Jong Il clarifies his definition of the often misused term "self-reliance" as "The revolutionary spirit and a principle of struggle of the communists in **carrying out the revolution by their own initiative**. One must believe in **one's own strength** and depend on it in economic construction ..." His definition of "self-sufficiency" emphasizes the intent of government policy, not the avoidance of obtaining material goods from other nations. He clarifies this further,

Building an independent national economy means building an economy which is **free from dependence on others** and which stands on its own feet, an economy which serves one's own people and develops on the strength of the resources of one's own country and by the efforts of one's own people.

*Self-reliance in Defense:* Kim Jong Il calls this “a fundamental principle of an independent state,” and defines it as “... defending one’s country by one’s own efforts.” Receiving “aid in national defense from fraternal countries and friends” is condoned, but the “main thing is one’s own strength.” He declares that, “Imperialism is a constant cause of war, and the main force of aggression and war today is US imperialism.” Naturally, the army’s primary responsibility is to defend the nation’s sovereignty, but it is also assigned a role similar to that of the KWP,

Only when the whole army is a cadre army will it become strong ...  
And a modernized army which blends its politico-ideological superiority with modern technology will become a really unconquerable revolutionary army.

In 1998 Kim Jong Il made this the basis of “*son’gun*” or military first politics. Suffice it to say here that he linked rather than distinguished between the “party” and the “army” by assigning them shared responsibility to promote *Juche*. Also, long before he succeeded his father, Kim Jong Il accented reliance on “modern technology” to complement the KPA’s “politico-ideological superiority.” He seems to have turned this rhetoric into concrete policy soon after his treatise on *Juche* appeared in 1982 as indicated by the many quotations of this treatise visible throughout the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center built between 1982 and 1985.

### ***Juche’s Impact on North Korea’s Foreign Policy***

North Korea’s current strategic priorities can be traced back half a century to the nation’s establishment. Now as then, Kim Jong Il’s priorities remain: national reunification, countering imperialism and building a self reliant socialist economy, all goals echoed in Kim’s “Guiding Principles of the *Juche* Idea.” North Korea’s official media (*The People’s Korea*, “Independent Policy,” November 6, 2006 at [www.kcckp.net](http://www.kcckp.net).) summarized North Korea’s national interests in a commentary entitled “Independent Policy” as being to:

1. preserve national sovereignty by rejecting “flunkeyism” while pursuing national reunification.
2. defend against imperialism, particularly that of the United States and Japan, by developing a “self reliant defense,” and
3. build a socialist nation with a “self sufficient economy.”

*National Unification:* Today this remains North Korea’s foremost foreign policy priority as Kim Jong Il stated in his 1997 essay, “Let US Carry Out the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung’s Instructions for National Unification,” “... Kim Il Sung regarded national reunification as the supreme task of our nation, ...” Kim Jong Il enshrined this in the *Juche* political culture which he explained in a 1997 essay, ... reunification ... is a question of putting an end to the foreign domination and intervention of south Korea, establishing national sovereignty throughout the country, linking again the blood ties of the divided nation, and realizing unity as one nation.

The primary impediments to national reunification are, according to the younger Kim, the U.S. imperialists’ occupation of south Korea and flunkeyism. The First Korean Joint Communiqué of July 4, 1972 pays respect to *Juche*’s rejection of flunkeyism and champions Korea’s sovereignty as evident in the text’s main point: reunification

should be achieved independently, without reliance upon outside force or its interference. All subsequent important joint Korean statements refer to the 1972 statement.

While *Juche* sets forth the nation's strategic priorities in a consistent and rigid manner, it allows some tactical flexibility depending on changing circumstances. This becomes apparent when we examine North Korea's shifting attitudes toward South Korea's leaders. Pyongyang restrained its rhetoric toward South Korea's two previous leaders, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, because of their perceived willingness to risk the United States' displeasure by adopting policies toward North Korea that the United States disapproved. But since Lee Myung Bak's inauguration as South Korea's president in February 2008, Pyongyang has reverted to bombarding South Korea's leader with vitriolic rhetoric. Viewed in the context of *Juche*, this is a consequence of President Lee's perceived "flunkeyism" toward the United States and Japan, *Juche*'s foremost "imperialists."

Pyongyang's verbal assaults on President Lee have intensified since he declared that "it is impossible to head for reunification and hard to improve south-north relations unless North Korea's nuclear arsenal is dismantled." North Korea's political commentators writing in the official KWP newspaper declared Lee to be a "flunkeyist" for allowing "outside influence" to infect north-south relations. An April 1, 2008 *Nodong sinmun* commentator exploded with vitriolic when he labeled Lee's administration a "regime" and called Lee a "charlatan" and "traitor." Lee was also accused of "sycophancy towards the U.S." because of his support of the United States' insistence that North Korea dismantle its nuclear arsenal and his alleged "frantic" effort to re-establish triangular military cooperation between Seoul, Washington and Tokyo. Anyone familiar with *Juche* could have anticipated these attacks and should expect their continuation.

Tense relations with the U.S. intensified when a new US president took office in 2001, setting the stage for the second Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis which erupted in late 2002 and the commencement of the Six Party Talks in August 2003. North Korea's Foreign Ministry spokesman in an August 13, 2003 statement (DPRK Foreign Ministry, "Fundamental Switchover in U.S. Hostile Policy Toward DPRK is Indispensable for Solution to Korea's Nuke Issue," at [www.1korea-np.co.jp/pk/195th\\_issue](http://www.1korea-np.co.jp/pk/195th_issue), August 14, 2003) labeled the U.S. demand that North Korea give up its nuclear ambitions "an unreasonable unilateral assertion." He then echoed Kim Jong Il's 1997 essay,

It will be considered that the U.S. has practically given up its **hostile policy** toward the DPRK when a non-aggression treaty with legal binding is concluded and diplomatic relations are established between the DPRK and the U.S. and it is made clear that the U.S. does not obstruct economic cooperation between the DPRK and other countries (i.e. ends its economic sanctions).

This statement summarizes Kim Jong Il's key points in his 1997 statement and ever since has remained over the past five years the DPRK's stance at the Six Party Talks. Since 2003, virtually every DPRK Foreign Ministry statement regarding relations with the United States has called for a "switch over" from the U.S. perceived "hostile policy" toward North Korea, the end of economic sanctions and the normalization of

bilateral relations. For example, on March 2, 2005 the spokesman said, “The key to the settlement of the nuclear issue between the DPRK and the US is for the US to replace its **hostile policy** with a policy of peaceful co-existence ...” Later he added, “The US denies a **hostile policy** toward north Korea, repeating empty talks that it has never been hostile to north Korea and has no intention to attack it.” Finally the spokesman concludes,

The Bush administration has so far pursued hostile policy toward the DPRK undisguisedly (*sic*) in a bid to topple its system, destroyed the groundwork for the six-party talks and removed all conditions and justification for negotiations, throwing a hurdle in the settlement of the nuclear issue.

The Korean Workers’ Party official newspaper *Nodong sinmun* commented in a signed article on March 20,

The U.S. imperialist aggressor forces’ presence in south Korea is a typical expression of the U.S. **hostile policy** toward the DPRK and a main obstacle in the way of ensuring peace. ... The U.S. imperialist aggressor forces are field executors of the U.S. anti-DPRK policy. The situation always remains unstable on the Korean Peninsula and the building of a solid peace-keeping mechanism, ..., has been delayed because the U.S. has frantically driven the U.S. forces present in south Korea into the escalating the moves to start a war of aggression against the DPRK, desperately pursuing **its hostile policy** toward the DPRK. ... The U.S. would be well advised to roll back its **hostile policy** for aggression and war against the DPRK and respond to the proposal for building the above-said mechanism on the peninsula. (DPRK *Nodong sinmun*, “U.S. Hostile Policy toward DPRK Slammed” at [www.kcna.co.jp](http://www.kcna.co.jp). March 20, 2008).

Japan now ranks second as an “imperialist” enemy after being number during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Japan’s role as a threatening imperialist resumed when, “Japan took active part in the Korean War ...” of 1950-53 by aligning itself with the United States and “obstructed the prosperity, development and reunification of Korea in every way.” (DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman, “DPRK to Settle Accounts with Japan,” [www.kcckp.net/en/news](http://www.kcckp.net/en/news). January 1, 2005).

The many twists and turns of North Korea’s attitude and policies toward South Korea, the United States and Japan point to two consistent phenomena in North Korea’s foreign policy: consistency of strategic goals and flexibility of tactics. Pyongyang’s goals remain ending South Korea’s perceived “flunkeyism” toward Washington and Tokyo, replacing the United States’ perceived “hostile policy” with normal diplomatic relations and getting Japan to do likewise. Its tactics, however, have shifted between nasty rhetoric and patient negotiations.

*The Grand Conspiracy:* Viewed through the prism of *Juche*, the United States “hostile policy” is more than an expression of paranoia and frustration. The policy is an “imperialist” plan coordinated in Washington and supported by Japan and the “flunkeyism” of South Korea’s present president to “strangle” North Korea and end its sovereignty. According to the first guiding principle of *Juche*, the leader, party and nation must struggle to prevent this. In Pyongyang’s view, the “imperialists”

primary tool for “strangling” North Korea is trilateral cooperation between the three allies, their military forces, maintenance of extensive economic sanctions on North Korea and demands that it unilaterally dismantle its nuclear arsenal.

North Korea since 1992 has consistently demanded that the United States and Japan take the following steps to end this “hostile policy:”

- stop imposing economic sanctions, including removal of North Korea from the U.S. List of Nations that Support International Terrorism, something Japan adamantly opposes pending resolution of the abduction issue and which several members of the U.S. Congress firmly supports. The sanctions imposed in 1950 under the Trading with the Enemy Act are also to be ended to allow Americans to invest in and trade with North Korea. Additionally Japan since the fall of 2006 has imposed its own unilateral economic sanctions on North Korea pending resolution of the abduction issue and dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal.
- A bilateral peace treaty between the United States and North Korea is to be signed, the United Nation’s Command (UNC) dismantled, and the Korean War Armistice replaced by a “new peace keeping mechanism.”
- All US military forces are to be withdrawn from the Korean Peninsula.
- South Korea is to halt its “flunkeyism” toward Washington and Tokyo, and adopt an “independent” stance that will enable it to deal with North Korea without interference from “outside powers” such as the United States and Japan.

Thus far, the United States and Japan since 2002 have refused to consider taking such steps except for the first – the phasing out of economic sanctions, but influential elements of the US government and Japan opposes this. Instead, they have offered North Korea diplomatic and economic inducements such as the normalization of relations, heavy fuel oil, food aid and other economic assistance to convince it to end its nuclear programs. But this is insufficient because *Juche* dictates that the above requirements, not just diplomatic and economic incentives, must be accomplished prior to North Korea agreeing to dismantle its “nuclear deterrent capability.”

### ***Son’gun – the Military First***

Given Pyongyang’s concerns about the “imperialists” “hostile policy,” Kim Jong Il has elevated *Juche*’s fourth guiding principle “self-reliance in defense” to his top priority under the heading “*son’gun chongchi*” or “military first politics.” North Korea’s official media tied “*son’gun*” to Kim Jong Il’s 1982 treatise *On the Juche Idea* and defined the term accordingly:

... Kim Jong Il took the *Son’gun* idea based on the *Juche* idea as the invariable guideline of the Korean revolution and applied it in all the fields of the revolution ... He laid down the *Son’gun* revolutionary theories such as the principle of putting the army ahead of the working class ...”

Official commentators further clarified Kim Jong Il’s “*son’gun* idea:”

If one has not one’s own military force powerful enough to beat off ... reactionary forces including the US, he has only himself to thank for his falling prey to the strong. ... As long as the imperialists suppress

the masses' cause of independence with bayonets, the significance of arms becomes great in the progress of the socialist construction .... This is why the idea of realizing independence elucidated by the *Juche* idea becomes the very principle of arms philosophy.

None of this augers well for either the normalization of US-North Korea and Japan-North Korea relations in the near future, or a quick resolution of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. Kim Jong Il's emphasis on "*son'gun*" elevates the KPA to a dominate position in the DPRK government. The KPA is authorized to develop a "self-reliant" defense capability that includes the use of "modern technology," i.e. nuclear weapons, to defend the nation's sovereignty. This suggests that it will be extremely difficult for even Kim Jong Il to convince his generals to dismantle their "nuclear deterrent" capability until the "imperialists" have definitively ended their "hostile policy." So long as the KPA perceives the "hostile policy" persists, it most likely will continue to see diplomatic and economic inducements insufficient to warren discarding North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

### **Conclusion**

*Juche* obviously plays a pervasive role in defining North Korea's political culture. It defines the nation's primary interests as achieving national unification, preserving national sovereignty and building a socialist economy and society. The leader's authority is established beyond challenge and he assigns roles to his party and the army. While the party is the leader's "general staff" for the propagation his ideology, the army defends the leader, his ideology and the nation's sovereignty. Together they are to struggle for the nation's foremost goal - national unification. But this will be possible only if South Korea rejects its "flunkeyism" toward the United States and Japan, and the imperialists are convinced to end their "hostile policy."

The ideology defines the nation's friends and foe. Relations with socialist nations like the People's Republic of China and allies like Russia are cherished while relations with non-aligned nations such as India and Indonesia are to be nurtured. Imperialism is deemed the main threat to man's "*chajusong*" or desire for self determination and to a nation's sovereignty. The foremost "imperialists" are the United States and Japan because their hostile policies aim to "strangle" North Korea. *Juche's* principle of a "self reliant defense" requires that the nation maintain a policy of "*son'gun*" or "military first" which enables the KPA to develop itself into a "self reliant," "invincible and modern" military force capable of deterring "imperialist aggression."

*Juche* lists some of the primary parameters of North Korea's foreign policy, past, present and future. It makes for consistency of strategic goals but allows tactical flexibility. It breaks with the dogmatism of Marxism and Leninism to allow a more pragmatic approach to resolving Korea's unique problems. Koreans are urged to prioritize their problems and formulate solutions based primarily on conditions within their own culture, nation and society. This has permitted a surprising degree of pragmatism in both foreign and domestic policy.

But *Juche's* propagation as the sole legitimate orthodoxy since at least 1982, if not earlier, has eroded this tendency away from dogmatism toward pragmatism. Consequently, Pyongyang's policy makers must avoid any appearance of being at



odds with their leader. Otherwise they could be accused of disloyalty or putting selfish aims before the common good. The politically correct and safest thing to do therefore is to advocate policies that promote *Juche's* strategic goals while cautiously proposing variations of the tactics for achieving these goals.

A further limit on the formulation of flexible foreign policy is the military's supremacy under Kim Jong Il. Diplomats striving to negotiate any agreements with a foreign nation, particularly the "imperialist" United States or Japan, must proceed with great caution. They cannot concede anything that might be perceived by Pyongyang's leadership as undercutting the nation's sovereignty. This issue remains particularly sensitive regarding the nuclear issue. Today, as in 1994, North Korea's membership in the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was viewed as a severe restraint on the nation's sovereign right to maintain a self-reliant defense. Kim Jong Il's accent on "*son'gun*" would appear to enhance the Korean People's Army ability to determine what is acceptable or not in the continuing Six Party Talks aimed at the dismantlement of North Korea's "nuclear deterrent" capability.

*Juche's* precepts strongly suggest that Pyongyang's diplomats will not be able to agree to any dismantlement of their nation's military capability without the concurrence of the KPA. According to *Juche*, the army must defend their nation and leader against the "imperialist United States." Until the perceived "hostile policy" has been completely dismantled, the KPA can be expected to cling to its "nuclear deterrent" capability.