

Policies and Ideologies of the Kim Jong-un Regime in North Korea: Theoretical Implications

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Abstract: *Soon after the death of Kim Jong-il on 17 December 2011, his youngest and previously least-known son, Kim Jong-un, was declared the next leader of North Korea. At least for now, it seems clear that the Kim Jong-un regime is determined to uphold the established policies and ideologies of its predecessor. The present study attempts to explain why that is the case using path-dependence theory. Obviously, the old policies and ideologies are intimately bound up with the political processes of the present regime. North Korea's unique monolithic system, comprising the Juche ideology and the military-first policy, which was constructed during the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regimes, has exerted a comprehensive influence on the country's political and socioeconomic development processes for decades, and it is clear that the existing policy and the institutional framework based on it wield a powerful influence on the current political processes. This greatly restricts the autonomy and the range of choices of the new incumbent, suggesting that path dependence is relevant in the case of the North Korean regime.*

Keywords: *North Korea, Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung, path dependence, monolithic system, Juche, military-first policy, ideology*

Introduction

Following the state funeral of Kim Jong-il on 28 December 2011, his son, Kim Jong-un, was officially declared the supreme leader of North Korea, with state media declaring him the “Great Successor”. Having held the titles of First Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, First

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Chairman of the National Defence Commission of the DPRK and Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army, and having also been a presidium member of the Central Politburo of the Workers' Party of Korea, Kim Jong-un is the current supreme leader of North Korea.

Since Kim Jong-un is in his late 20s, Swiss-educated and fluent in several European languages,¹ not a few commentators thought he might guide North Korea on a path of reform and opening up to the world. North Korea was ruled by two absolute dictators – Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il – for more than a half century, and both exercised their power to the full as though they were kings. Neither leader was concerned about increasing North Korea's external trade or raising its international competitiveness. As a result, North Korea has become one of the poorest and most isolated countries in the world.

North Korea's current economic hardship and international isolation become clear in a simple comparison with its southern counterpart, South Korea. As of the end of 2010, North Korea's external trade totalled US\$4,170 million, which was only $\frac{1}{212}$ of South Korea's US\$891.59 billion. North Korea's gross national income (GNI) per capita was only US\$1,074, which was $\frac{1}{20}$ of South Korea's US\$20,759 (Table 1). Accordingly, there is no question that the number one priority of the newly inaugurated regime should be to abandon the policy of isolation and begin a process of reform and opening up as soon as possible.

The isolation and severe economic difficulties that North Korea is currently experiencing are comparable to those suffered by China and Vietnam, both of which maintain a one-party dictatorship like North Korea. Yet, unlike North Korea, these two communist countries pushed forward with reform and opening up long ago in order to overcome their isolation and poverty. In China, Deng Xiaoping initiated a set of reforms, accompanied by policies of opening up the country, immediately after he assumed power following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In December 1978, shortly after taking power, Deng radically changed the course of national policy, and chose a pragmatic path of economic development. This policy of reform and opening up was pivotal in changing the direction of China's development, accelerating its economic growth over subsequent decades. Having achieved miraculous economic growth over a very short period, China has become one of the largest economies in the world. Deng once declared that being poor is not socialism (Kissinger, 2011). In accordance with this pragmatic ideology, Deng actively imported foreign technologies and expertise, as well as foreign capital, in order to provide what his country needed (Kissinger, 2011). Furthermore, during the process of reform and opening up, Deng decisively abolished the old

Table 1. Major economic indices of North and South Korea (2010)

	North Korea	South Korea
Population (1,000)	24,187	49,410
Economic growth rate (%)	-0.5	6.2
GNI per capita	US\$1,074	US\$20,759
Sum total of trade	US\$4.17 bn	US\$891.59 bn

Source: Statistics Korea (2012).

conventionalities of Mao not only by abandoning the cult of personality but also by categorically refusing to assume top-level official positions. Unlike the ideological Mao, Deng was armed with a thoroughly practical philosophy, and was thus able to take the lead in carrying out the policy of reform and opening up (Vogel, 2011).

In Vietnam, a similar set of economic reforms, the so-called “*doi moi*” (renovation), was embarked upon in December 1986 by Nguyen Van Linh, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam. There remains direct state control in both the political and economic spheres in Vietnam, but it is fair to say that the country is on the right track to becoming a true market economy in which the market mechanism plays a dominant role (Karadjis, 2005). The reforms in China and Vietnam were, of course, predicated on collective political leadership. Unlike North Korea, both China and Vietnam had long since abandoned hereditary succession of power, thus providing room for a degree of pluralism and new ways of thinking to sprout. Furthermore, even though China and Vietnam are still ruled by their respective communist parties, both have moved away from personality-dominated autocratic institutions of state.

What North Korea needs now is to replicate the kind of change that happened in China and Vietnam. North Korea needs a practical leader with courage and political will who can lead the country towards reform and openness by freeing himself from outdated ideologies and shedding the shackles of the monolithic system of governance. Contrary to the high hopes of many outsiders, however, the recent third-generation power succession and the apparent continuation of the status quo under the new regime suggest the opposite. The new North Korean regime has basically continued the old policies and ideologies, and looks set to reinforce them even further as time passes.

This raises a number of important questions. Why has the North Korean leadership not followed the example of China and Vietnam a few decades ago? Why has it allowed the three-generation power succession to happen, and power to fall to an heir who is poorly equipped to govern? Why is the new North Korean regime continuing to pursue earlier policies and ideologies, even though North Korea desperately needs change? What theoretical implications can be drawn from this continuation of old policies and ideologies under the new regime? And, finally, what can we say about the future prospects of the policy directions of the Kim Jong-un regime on the basis of such theoretical implications? These are the issues that will be considered in this study. The present study uses path-dependence theory and new data to help answer these questions.

This study consists of five parts, including this introduction. The next part reviews path-dependence theory, while the third part considers the three most powerful and comprehensive political and ideological legacies of the North Korean regime – the monolithic system, *Juche* ideology, and the military-first policy – which are apparently exerting great influence on North Korea’s political processes today. The fourth part examines the characteristics and the policy stance of the Kim Jong-un regime on the basis of what has transpired so far. The final part discusses the major theoretical implications of the present study.

Theory Review

Although clear definitions are rare, path dependence can be generally defined as the relevance of previous events to future ones in a temporal sequence. Path-dependence theory was originally developed by scholars who were critical of neoclassical economic

theory. Studies in the 1980s by Paul David (1986; 1985) and Brian Arthur (1989), in particular, played a pivotal role in advancing path-dependence theory. Since that time, path-dependence theory has been used extensively to analyse issues in almost all fields of study, ranging from the choice of technology to the formation of government policies, political behaviours, inertia of political institutions, formation of urban regions, formation of industrial regions, pest control strategies, and formation of languages and laws.

Although diverse interpretations exist across a wide range of fields of study, the most commonly understood concept of path-dependence theory is the one based on the argument that history matters. That is, the process of social change in general does not unfold in an arbitrary way, but rather recurs, meaning that earlier decisions tend to affect subsequent decision-making processes. In this respect, what happened in the past is not a thing of the past at all (Teece et al., 1997, p. 522), because the behaviour, actions, circumstances and decisions of today and the future depend greatly on those of the past. Therefore, history is considered a very important factor in path-dependence theory. According to the theory, it is relatively easy to change decisions soon after they are made, but it gets harder and harder to change them at a later point in time because events restrict the available options. According to this logic, decisions taken in the past become an increasingly absolute and inescapable norm as more time passes. This is similar to the situation of an African cheetah running after a small antelope at full speed. Although a much bigger antelope comes into the cheetah's view, it is easier and better for the cheetah just to keep chasing the small antelope because it requires a tremendous amount of energy and a more sophisticated technique for the cheetah to suddenly change direction in order to pursue the bigger one.

Pierson developed path-dependence theory by adding the concept of "increasing returns". In other words, the probability of taking further steps along the same path increases as the relative benefits of the current activity, compared with other possible options, increase or as the costs of switching to a plausible alternative increase (Pierson, 2000, p. 252). According to Pierson (2000; 1997), politics is particularly susceptible to this logic because of its collective nature, its complexity and opacity, and the institutional density of politics, political authority and power asymmetries. Three additional characteristics of politics – the absence or weakness of the efficiency-enhancing mechanisms of competition and learning, the short time horizons of political actors, and the strong status quo bias built into political institutions – also enhance the appeal of policy inertia (Pierson, 2000, p. 257). If the lock-in effects are added, the costs of reform or institutional transformation increase significantly; the more solidly the lock-in effects or factors are built into institutions, the less likely is institutional or policy change (Pierson, 2000; Pierson, 1994, p. 181). These principles of path-dependence theory apply not only to the realm of political institutions and policies, but also to that of cognitive science, ranging from ideologies to the understandings of particular aspects of governments or orientations toward political groups or parties (Pierson, 2000, p. 260).

In short, all of the major features of political activities, including public policies and institutions, are intrinsically resistant to change. Furthermore, the policies set up in the past and the history of such policy-making tend to affect subsequent decision-making processes and policy outcomes significantly, even after the original conditions that gave rise to the need for those particular policies or institutions have changed.

If decision-makers cannot escape the existing institutional and policy framework or legacy, the autonomy of decision-makers is considerably constrained. The choices and preferences of decision-makers as well as multiple societal powers are significantly limited and constrained by the institutionalised norms of such decision-making processes. According to this logic, institutional or policy frameworks constructed in the past influence the institutional and policy choices of the decision-makers of today, and will continue to do so into the future. In this respect, the policies implemented in the past can be regarded as a shackle, setting limits to the range of choices for the present and future decision-makers.

It is clear that path-dependence theory can provide a highly useful analytical framework for understanding why the new North Korean regime has failed to introduce the anticipated change and why old policies and ideologies persist, even though the regime evidently understands that the status quo cannot save the country and the regime itself altogether. Obviously, the status quo is closely associated with the longstanding binding forces of the old policies and ideologies on the present regime. Therefore, in order to understand why the policy inertia or status quo continues in North Korea despite the recent power transfer, it is necessary to examine the original political and ideological legacies that have determined and reinforced the particular path of the country's political and socioeconomic development. Accordingly, the following section focuses on the three most powerful political and ideological legacies of the North Korean regime – the monolithic system, *Juche* ideology, and the military-first policy – which still exert great influence upon the political processes in North Korea.

Ideological Legacies of the North Korean Regime

The monolithic system and Juche ideology

The legitimacy of North Korea's hereditary power succession is based on its unique political system, the so-called monolithic system (*yooilcheje*). A number of studies have been written on the characteristics of North Korea's political system, but no broad consensus on the subject has been reached (Kim, 2006; Choi, 2001; Lee, 2001; Seo, 2000; Oh, 2000; Kim, 1995; McCormack, 1993; Lee, 1991; Cumings, 1997; 1995; 1982). Some call it a corporatist state system; others describe it as a fascist state system, a guerrillaist state system, a *suryeong* (leader) system, a monarchical system, a theocratic state system or a neo-totalitarian state system (Lee, 2001, pp. 115–22). All of these arguments, however, point to one thing in common: unlike all other communist countries, North Korea has established and maintained a monolithic system, which has played a crucial role in enabling the continuing monopoly of power by a sole leader (*suryeong*) and facilitating the hereditary succession of power from Kim Il-sung to his son (Kim Jong-il) and then to his grandson (Kim Jong-un).

This monolithic system has the following features. First, it exhibits the highest level of power concentration in the hands of one individual. Under the monolithic system, social revolution and construction are carried out based solely on the ideology of the *suryeong* and at his command and direction; the political party, the people and the whole nation act as one body under the guidance of the *suryeong*. Accordingly, the *suryeong* himself is at the apex or core of the system (Lee, 2001, p. 210). Following

the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, his son, Kim Jong-il, took on the role of *suryeong*, and since the death of Kim Jong-il in 2011, his son, Kim Jong-un, has taken on that role. Second, under the monolithic system, the whole society is mobilised and militarised with the aim of replicating the power of the *suryeong*. The *suryeong* drives his country towards a militaristic, communist “ideal” by enforcing the routine instillation of the military spirit at all times and at all levels of society. Third, under the monolithic system, a discourse to rationalise the power of the *suryeong* is developed along with a wide range of social organisations to reproduce the patterns of the *suryeong*’s behaviour. Finally, the monolithic system is usually accompanied by a cult of personality. This includes exaggerated compliments directed at the *suryeong*’s genius and achievements, the dissemination of moral tales featuring the *suryeong* through the media and school education, the preservation of sites associated with the *suryeong*’s activities, and the marking of the leaders’ birthdays as the country’s most important national holidays (Lee, 2001, p. 210).

The construction of the monolithic system started in earnest in the 1960s when the purge of all Kim Il-sung’s opponents was completed and *Juche* ideology came to the fore as a political ideology to facilitate the establishment of the monolithic system. *Juche* literally means the “main body”, “subject”, “independent stand” or “spirit of self-reliance”.² It was originally developed as a political slogan to symbolise North Korea’s rejection of the Soviet Union’s policy of de-Stalinisation in the mid-1950s. In a speech delivered in April 1965, Kim Il-sung (1965) outlined the three fundamental principles of *Juche* – “independence in politics” (*jaju*), “self-sufficiency in the economy” (*jarip*), and “self-reliance in national defence” (*jawi*). He thus implied that the North Korean people must have independence in thought and politics, economic self-sufficiency, and self-reliance in defence, and that state policy must reflect the will of the masses. In this respect, the concept of *Juche* is apparently akin to a human-oriented philosophy. It soon developed into a system that decreed that the masses, in order to fulfil their duty, must submit to the guidance of the *suryeong*. In this way, a human-oriented philosophy was systematically converted into a *suryeong*-oriented philosophy, which later became a crucial part of “Kimilsungism”.

In 1986, the theory of the “sociopolitical organism” was developed and added to the *Juche* ideology; according to this theory, the *suryeong*, the ruling party and the masses are one organic body, with the *suryeong* representing the brain. This theory was further developed into the “blood” theory, whereby ideological foundations were provided for the construction of an organic system, in which the party, the whole nation and the masses act as one body in accordance with the *suryeong*’s directions. In 1992, the *Juche* concept’s remaining connections to Marxism were completely removed from the North Korean Constitution, and *Juche* was elevated to the status of a kind of religious³ and moral system, which ultimately defined the purpose of people’s lives, thereby providing the ideological justification for the hereditary succession of power from Kim Il-sung to his son, Kim Jong-il, and then to his grandson, Kim Jong-un. North Korea thus possesses all of the characteristics of a monolithic system, with *Juche* being developed as a logical tool to rationalise it.

In the meantime, *Juche*, in that it advocates resistance to political subordination or economic domination, has directly or indirectly given rise to a unique economic development strategy in North Korea. It is aimed at building up a self-reliant economic system, under which reproduction would always be made possible through the mobili-

sation of human and material resources at home and the expansion of the domestic market. This development strategy has played a pivotal role in holding back the development of foreign trade and the adoption of foreign technologies. Despite North Korea's lack of capital, its leadership has continued to disregard the concept of comparative advantage, a dominant principle in international trade, and concentrated on heavy industrial production.

Under the monolithic system, economic considerations have been completely disregarded and the nation's investment priorities have been significantly distorted. In other words, economic efficiency has been subordinated to political goals and the prestige of the *suryeong* has been given priority over everything else in North Korea. For example, projects that promote the prestige of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and North Korea's national independence, such as the *Juche* Idea Tower, the Triumphal Arch and the Kim Il-sung Stadium in Pyongyang, and the hosting of big international events such as the 1989 Pyongyang International Youth Festival,⁴ have been given the highest priority in the national budget. The mobilisation of large crowds for extreme *suryeong* worship campaigns, which have increased in frequency since the mid-1960s, is also an example of politics being put before economics in order to reinforce the monolithic system. This kind of policy is a primary reason for the continuing slump in the North Korean economy.

Once it reaches a certain level of development, a nation needs endogenous growth in order to jump to the next level. Under the monolithic system, however, the North Korean economy has been constructed in such a way as to make it suited to a speedy battle through the mobilisation of ideology and social institutions. This development strategy has drained individuals of their personality and creativity, making it almost impossible to achieve the technological innovation necessary for endogenous development (Lee, 2001, pp. 348–49).

The North Korean monolithic system has also had a negative impact on the country's reforms and opening up. Firstly, the monolithic system has been maintained primarily by controlling information and isolating the people from the outside world, both to prevent them from comparing North Korea with other countries and to maintain a sense of hostility toward the outside world in order to reinforce internal unity (Ha, 2004, p. 138). The isolationism inherent in the monolithic system has greatly hindered the introduction of elements of a market economy and openness, both of which emphasise transparency. Furthermore, one of the basic characteristics of the monolithic system is its unitary nature, as evidenced by the North Korean leaders' public rejection of political pluralism and the multi-party system (Lee, 2001, p. 349). Under such a unitary system, all thoughts and ideas must come from the *suryeong* and hence the whole nation takes the form of a series of concentric circles, with the *suryeong* positioned at the centre. The kind of pluralism that usually results from opening up to the outside world would inevitably pose a serious threat to this unitary system. This is the primary reason that the North Korean leadership has been so unwilling to open up the country to the outside world.

Given the present political circumstances in North Korea, where the monolithic system and *Juche* ideology are still upheld firmly and consistently, it is perhaps no wonder that the bold policy initiatives necessary for comprehensive reforms and opening up by the new regime are almost impossible. It remains to be seen how much longer North Korea's monolithic system and *Juche* ideology will last, but it is now clear that as long as North Korea adheres to them, it has little chance of successfully carrying out significant reforms.

Military-first policy

The military-first policy, often called the “*seon-gun*”, emerged as North Korea’s official national policy on the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, and has since become a primary ideology that guides the political and economic life of the country. The military-first policy can be understood as a political ideology that implies that North Korea’s economy, diplomacy and politics must be guided by its strong military power.⁵ It was officially introduced by Kim Jong-il in 1995 as part of his strategic move to consolidate his grip on power after his father’s death and to overcome a series of crises that befell North Korea in the early 1990s – e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea’s precarious international position, the death of Kim Il-sung, and several natural disasters followed by severe famine and economic hardship (Ko, 2011, pp. 183–85).

Embarking on an aggressive and threatening move to enhance North Korea’s military might at the expense of other parts of society, Kim Jong-il prioritised its army in the affairs of state and allocated national resources to bolster military power as the first priority.⁶ Since the *seon-gun* era began, soldiers have been promoted to higher positions much more quickly than those in other professions, and have become the object of social respect. The North Korean leadership has also given full rights to the military to closely monitor the movements of the population, and the daily instillation of the military spirit into ordinary people has been enforced as part of its attempt to reinforce ideological control.

In such a rigid political environment, where the military and its spirit are emphasised in all aspects of state and society, it is natural that economic policies and reforms have been neglected. While North Korea, through the military-first policy, has succeeded in strengthening its military might, particularly through the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), including nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, it has degenerated into a failing state that is not even able to properly feed its people.

Characteristics and Policy Stance of the Kim Jong-un Regime

The succession process to Kim Jong-un began in earnest when his father, Kim Jong-il, suffered a stroke in August 2008. On 8 January 2009, Kim Jong-un’s birthday, the ailing Kim Jong-il finally designated Kim Jong-un as the next leader of North Korea (*Kyungnyang Shinmun*, 28 December 2011). Later, in September 2010, Kim Jong-il made Kim Jong-un a four-star general and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers’ Party. From that moment, Kim Jong-un began to accompany his father on military and other site visits and was viewed as the heir apparent. Following the state funeral for his father on 28 December 2011, Kim Jong-un was officially declared the supreme leader, with North Korean state media announcing him as the “Great Successor”.

Kim Jong-un’s succession differs greatly from his father’s in 1994 in many respects. Kim Jong-il emerged as heir in 1980 but did not take power until his father died in 1994; thus, he had decades to build a power base with the systematic support of his father before taking power. At the time of Kim Il-sung’s death, Kim Jong-il was 53 years old, and had already received intensive leadership training for more than 20 years in preparation for ruling the country. Long before succeeding to power, Kim Jong-il was also well known to both ordinary people and the ruling elite. By contrast, Kim

Jong-un rose to power almost instantly and has had little time to learn statecraft and consolidate his power. When he was designated as heir by his ailing father in early 2009, Kim Jong-un was such an unknown that ordinary people inside North Korea did not even know what he looked like or what he had done in the past (*NEWSIS.COM*, 17 December 2011).

Given the apparently weak power base and inexperience of the young leader, many outsiders have cast doubt on the durability and viability of his regime. One notable critic was Kim Jong-nam,⁷ Kim Jong-un's ex-patriot eldest half-brother, who voiced his critique of the Kim Jong-un regime when he met journalists outside the country, thus directly challenging the legitimacy and capability of Kim Jong-un as leader (*CNN.com*, 17 January 2012).

As explained above, however, given the powerful influence of North Korea's monolithic system based on *Juche* ideology and the lack of political alternatives within the country, the power of the Kim Jong-un regime will undoubtedly be consolidated to some degree. Before Kim Jong-un's rule began, key members of the party, government and military had already been ousted by virtue of traffic accidents, heart attacks, executions by shooting and dismissals (*Iryo Shinmun*, 26 December 2011). In such a tense and violent political atmosphere, the North Korean leadership has not made any noticeable mistakes in the process of power transfer to Kim Jong-un, and there have not been any major signs to indicate that the succession process has been derailed. In line with the instructions of the departed Kim Jong-il, the Politburo of the Workers' Party of Korea formally appointed Kim Jong-un as Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army on 30 December 2011 (Cheong, 2012). Later, on 11 April 2012, the ruling Korean Workers' Party named Kim Jong-un as Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the party and a standing member of the Politburo, and also promoted him to First Secretary during a party conference (Cheong, 2012). During the fifth session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly, held on 13 April 2012, Kim Jong-un was named First Chairman of the National Defence Commission (Cheong, 2012). The elevation to the top defence post finally completed his rise to the pinnacle of party, military and state leadership.

Table 2. Major events during Kim Jong-un's succession process

August 2008	Kim Jong-un emerged as heir
8 January 2009	Kim Jong-il designated Kim Jong-un as the next leader of North Korea
27 September 2010	Kim Jong-il made Kim Jong-un a four-star general
28 September 2010	Kim Jong-un was appointed as the vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party
17 December 2011	Kim Jong-il died of heart attack
29 December 2011	Kim Jong-un was named Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army
11 April 2012	Kim Jong-un was named Chairman of the Central Military Commission and a standing member of the Politburo Kim Jong-un was also promoted to First Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea
13 April 2012	Kim Jong-un was named First Chairman of the National Defence Commission

Along with these official activities, Kim Jong-un launched a comprehensive range of informal activities – e.g. attending an orchestral concert and a play along with top members of the central leadership and hosting state banquets for the ruling elite. Kim Jong-un's frequent military field inspections after taking power, as well as the top military leaders' pledge of allegiance to him, as witnessed at the military parades held in Pyongyang to mark the birthdays of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, also suggest his strong grip on power over the 1.2 million-strong North Korean military (*The New York Times*, 15 April 2012). It is fair to say that for the moment Kim Jong-un has succeeded in showing off his authority both internally and externally in many formal and informal settings, and this has evidently shaken off any doubts about the viability of his hold on power (Cheong, 2012). Accordingly, under these circumstances, it is unlikely that a collective leadership system, or a joint ruling system between Kim Jong-un and the ruling elite, which would directly contradict North Korea's traditional *suryeong* system based on a monolithic system, will emerge. Judging by appearances, Kim Jong-un seems to have been guided by his aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, and uncle, Jang Song Taek, since the succession campaign began in 2009, but this is likely to be a temporary and transient phenomenon (Cheong, 2012). Once Kim Jong-un consolidates his grip on power, the current leadership arrangement will revert to a one-man leadership system completely dominated by Kim Jong-un (Cheong, 2012).

In terms of the policies and ideologies of the Kim Jong-un regime, it is fair to say that they do not differ greatly from those of the previous regime. For example, North Korea's New Year's message, which was published on 1 January 2012, repeated the emphasis on the military-first policy and did not include such terms as reform or openness (*Guardian*, 1 January 2012; *Gukbang Ilbo*, 3 January 2012). In addition, at the fourth Workers' Party conference, convened on 11 April 2012, a newly amended party regulation emphasising the earlier policies and ideologies – including the military-first policy, *Juche* ideology and anti-imperialism – was adopted unanimously (Cheong, 2012).

As if to confirm the continuation of existing policy trajectories, an outwardly cooperative nuclear proliferation agreement with the US government was broken exactly two weeks later. The agreement was signed on 29 February 2012 and was intended to temporarily halt uranium enrichment at North Korea's main nuclear complex in Yongbyon and to impose a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests – all in exchange for 240,000 tons of nutritional assistance. Yet the Kim Jong-un regime pushed ahead with its test-firing of a long-range missile known as the *Unha-3* carrying the *Kwangmyongsong-3* satellite on 13 April 2012, thus demonstrating North Korea's complete disregard not only for international opposition but also for its own promises (*The New York Times*, 12 April 2012). At the Supreme People's Assembly meeting held immediately after the missile launch, Kim Jong-un re-emphasised the military-first policy and vowed to continue to allocate a large proportion of the state budget to the military (*CTV News*, 17 April 2012). Amid the ensuing uproar, it was reported that North Korea had almost completed preparations for its third nuclear test (*Daily Mail*, 24 April 2012; *Maeilkyongje Shinmun*, 13 April 2012).

In his first public speech on 15 April 2012, to mark the 100th anniversary of the birthday of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un pledged to pursue his grandfather's *Juche* ideology and his father's military-first policy (*BBC News*, 15 April 2012; *The New York Times*, 15 April 2012; *Money Today*, 15 April 2012). On the following

day (16 April 2012), when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted its presidential statement unanimously, strongly condemning North Korea's rocket launch, the Kim Jong-un regime denounced the UNSC's presidential statement and announced the annulment of the 29 February agreement with the US, thus demonstrating its firm resolution to continue missile launches and nuclear testing in the future (*Maeilkyongje Shinmun*, 18 April 2012; *The New York Times*, 17 April 2012). Irrespective of whether the primary motive for this defiance is to show off the regime's presence and status to the world or to gain the upper hand in future negotiations with the US government, these actions cannot be judged to be rational or reasonable, given the severe economic difficulties North Korea faces.⁸

In sum, all of the militant rhetoric and gestures exhibited by the Kim Jong-un regime since the death of Kim Jong-il strongly suggest its firm resolve to continue to uphold old policies and ideologies rather than abandon them.

Conclusion: Theoretical Implications

Having been constructed decades earlier during the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regimes, North Korea's monolithic system, *Juche* ideology and military-first policy, and the frameworks of the policies based on them, have had a powerful influence on its decision-making processes over a long period of time. As they inherently disregard economic considerations and subordinate economic efficiency to political goals, their influence on North Korea's economic development and openness has on the whole not been a positive one. Although North Korea's institutional foundations were eroded considerably in the early 1990s, when a series of crises, including the severe economic downturn, befell North Korea, the three pillars underpinning the regime's rule have been effectively reinforced through scrupulous and concerted efforts on the part of its ruling elite. Given the unique historical development of North Korea, there is no doubt that no one in the present North Korean leadership is free from the powerful and pervasive influence of the monolithic system, *Juche* ideology and the military-first policy.

Evidently, these three pillars of the regime's rule have had a major influence on the decision-making processes of the incumbent regime led by Kim Jong-un, and have set limits on the choices of decision-makers, as has been the case since the Kim Il-sung era, thus hindering any significant change, let alone the reforms and opening up to the outside world that North Korea so desperately needs. The reason that the Kim Jong-un regime is still bent on upholding the old policies and ideologies is because the range of its policy choices has been seriously limited by the powerful influence of the monolithic system, *Juche* ideology and the military-first policy. In other words, it would be far more reasonable and rational – safer – for the Kim Jong-un regime to persevere with the status quo than to deal with the political and socioeconomic disorder and opposition that could follow a sudden shift from the earlier policies and ideologies to those of reform and openness. In this sense, the incumbent regime's bellicose foreign policy stance, as well as North Korea's recently completed three-generation succession, can be understood as inevitable consequences in the North Korean regime.

This analysis suggests that path dependence is a relevant concept in the North Korean context, and it thus contributes to a substantiation of the validity of path dependence theory. It would be imprudent to forecast with complete confidence the future policy directions of the Kim Jong-un regime, but in the light of such path

dependence in action, one can reasonably conclude that unless some dramatic events intervene to disrupt the flow of events, the prospects of the Kim Jong-un regime breaking away from the old policies and ideologies and adopting policies of reform and opening up are slim. On the contrary, having just achieved his rise to power, Kim Jong-un is more likely to persist in his reign of terror and militant foreign policy stance based on the old military-first policy, in order to consolidate his grip on power and strengthen the internal unity of his regime.

Notes

1. Kim Jong-un is reportedly fluent in English, French, German and Italian (Cheong, 2010, p. 175).
2. On “*Juche*” ideology, see Shin (2004); Chang (2003); Song (1997); Ko (1993); Kim (1993); and Park (2002; 1982).
3. Many commentators liken *Juche* ideology to a sort of religious movement. See Park (1998); Oh and Hassig (2000); Belke (1999); Snyder (1999); Armstrong (1998); and Barry (1996, p. 118).
4. The festival was held in an attempt to rival the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, and North Korea spent around US\$5 billion during the three years of preparation, which was approximately 23 per cent of its GNP at that time (Ha, 1997, p. 169).
5. For more information on the military-first policy, see Kim (2000).
6. It was reported by CNN in February 2005 that more than one quarter of North Korea’s GDP had been spent on the military (CNN.com, 10 February 2005).
7. Kim Jong-nam, aged 42, is Kim Jong-il’s son by his first wife, Sung Hae-rim. As Kim Jong-il’s eldest son, Kim Jong-nam had been groomed for succession, but reportedly fell out of favour after 2001, when he was detained at Narita Airport in Japan with a fake passport attempting to visit Tokyo Disneyland. Since that time, he has lived in apparent exile in Macao and Beijing.
8. North Korea has reportedly spent around US\$850 million on its failed launch of the *Unha-3* rocket and *Kwangmyongsong-3* satellite over the past ten years (SBS News, 13 April 2012). This is estimated to be equivalent to the cost of feeding 19 million people for one year (Segyeilbo, 15 April 2012).

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