



## Between Pyongyang, Beijing, Moscow, and Kim Jong Un

Chae-Yeon Kang (Institute for Peace and Unification Studies,  
Seoul National University)

After 2018, the path Kim Jong Un blazed across Beijing, Panmunjom, Singapore, Hanoi, and Moscow was such that expectations arose that he might become “the leader of a normal state” and that a “new North Korea” might emerge. Kim Jong Un has become more aggressive about the restoration of multi-player economic relations, the strategic partnership between China and North Korea, and the strategic interest between Russia and North Korea than of denuclearization. The improving inter-Korean relations have only served as a means for negotiation on denuclearization between the US and North Korea, and have often put South Korea in a position of embarrassment. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un has been flaunting his position as the leader of a normal state while he seeks a new style of leadership over domestic changes in politics, the economy, and culture. Now, the “normal state” change of North Korea is focused on the inside and outside of the country. As of June 12, 2019, over a period of about eighteen months (January 1, 2018-June 12, 2019), the fifty-four major news media outlets of South Korea have reported 2,175 news stories related to North Korea’s normalization. So, is it possible that North Korea has become a “normal state?”

### **The Path to the Normalization of the State, and the Other Side**

There are three recent issues related to Kim Jong Un’s expansive moves in North Korea which have drawn widespread attention. The first is his open leadership and the circumvention of the “mysticism of reception” with regard to political and social aspects. The public was given the impression of “a leader of a normal state” again from the figure cut by Kim Jong Un on the first day of 2019 as he read the New Year’s Address while seated on a sofa in a party building. Kim Jong Un

stated, “If we mystify the leader’s revolutionary activities and manners, we will mask the truth” in letters issued to participants of a party convention on March 9, 2019. “Mysticism of reception” is an ideology of the group mobilization system which results in a sense of “absoluteness” and “unconditionality” of the leadership. This statement means that Kim Jong Un is now circumventing the formalism created by the “mysticism of reception.” Further, government organizations highlight that placing the burden on them for social projects actually equates to “anti-human, anti-party” dissent against party policy. These changes indicate an epoch-making historical event in contrast to previous governments.

The second is North Korea’s dream of achieving production localization and the globalization of North Korean industry through its “Special District Policy.” North Korea once again approached the topic of production localization at a light industry conference held in March 2013 after a ten-year hiatus since the concept was first discussed in 2003. North Korea is also integrating IT into domestic products in the fields of publicity, marketing, and technical development. This is being hotly discussed on North Korea’s thirteen major websites. With this, North Korean domestic products are gradually replacing Chinese products among North Koreans.

In addition, messages embedded in domestic inspections send a warning about the formalism, conservatism, individualism, and rankism of North Korean party cadres. North Korea’s domestic inspections are surpassing military inspections in terms of frequency. General data provided by the Rodong Sinmun on Kim Jong Un’s domestic inspections since 2018 shows that there were six times as many domestic inspections relating to economic enterprises as compared to military inspections over a period of eighteen months. In contrast to previous governments, the current government doesn’t visit pre-designated locations, instead baffling executives with random surprise visits. Further, the current government assessment of North Korea’s mass movements, such as the “Speed Battles” which were held at the tourist district of the Wonsan-Galma coast, as “slipshod” indicates clear fault-finding in the so-called achievements of the previous governments. The “Speed Battles” which were created during the process of Kim Jong Un’s succession to Kim Jong-Il were called “Pyongyang Speed.” The “70s Speed-Creating Campaign,” the “80s Speed-Creating Campaign,” the “90s Speed-Creating Campaign,” and “Heechun Speed” in Kim Jong Il’s period and “Mallima Speed” in Kim Jong Un’s period are the pivot of North Korea’s mass movements. In this way, Kim Jong Un has circumvented the deification of his leadership and other policies of the previous leadership, instead finding North Korea’s social ills rooted in these former policies. In contrast to his father and grandfather, he points out that North Korea needs to concede “the reality of North Korea” and that “business with emotion and heart” should take precedence

above all else. It appears that Kim Jong Un's challenge will be undoing these North Korean social ills.

Third, North Korea is focused on making significant economic and social changes to its general education and higher education systems with an eye to globalization. North Korea replaced its compulsory education system initiated in 2003 which required one year of nursery school, four years of elementary school, and six years of middle school with the current system requiring one year of nursery school, five years of elementary school, three years of middle school, and three years of high school, adding new processes and subjects in the reformation. North Korea has also instituted a mixed style of education which includes both multiple choice questions and narrative questions in its testing. North Korea is attempting to imitate the higher education of normal states by reforming the education system and increasing the number of universities. The industrial universities of Wonsan and Hamhung as well as the central universities of Pyongyang have all been reformed into standard universities. Moreover, Hwangbuk university and Pyongbuk university have also undergone reforms to follow the models of local universities created by Sariwon and Sinuiju cities. The most important changes made through these reforms include 1) curriculum correlation between regular courses, master's courses, and doctoral courses of universities, 2) the shift from a graded school system to a credit system, 3) a reduction of common subjects and increase of elective subjects, and 4) expansion of university-industry cooperation institutes and institutional integration of central universities with other colleges. Finally, North Korea instituted a remote system during the 2017-2018 university entrance examinations and mobilized communications, the post office (for computer provision), police (to maintain security and control of test-takers and computers), and the electric power industry office (for power supply) to protect the integrity of the remote system.

### **The Dilemma of a North Korean-style “Normal State”**

Kim Jong Un faces numerous challenges in implementing his “destruction of the status quo” strategy to create a normal state, which necessitates deviating from the previous system's problems, ills of the market, isolation from global society, and so on. However, the biggest dilemma is that Kim Jong Un's subconscious remains rooted in maintaining North Korea's ideology. Domestically, it may be that he cannot read the reality of North Korea's changes, or it may be that he remains focused on his own survival. Internationally, North Korea continues to encounter dissonance between Trump's principle of bilateral talks and Kim Jong Un's principle of multilateral talks, and the opacity of denuclearization. After the collapse of the Singapore talks, Russia and China brought North Korea's problems to the table in multilateral talks. Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang

accelerated this process, as these visits are a good strategic check against the US in the ongoing trade war between the US and China as well as the denuclearization talks.

North Korea's dilemmas include 1) the dissonance between Kim Jong Un's "destruction of the status quo" strategy and the solidity of the system built by independent stakeholders owing to marketization, 2) the dissonance between Kim Jong Un's rejection of unconditional "mysticism of reception" and the advertising slogan of the Rodong Sinmun, and 3) dependence on "family politics" with Kim Yo-jong, Ri Sol-ju, Hyon Song-wol, Choe Son-hui, etc. As time passes, it has become clearer that underlying Kim Jong Un's liberal leadership are North Korea's intensifying "family politics" and his own mental fatigue. Economically, the regime faces the dilemma of unrealistic economic policies and routes, such as the focus on obtaining foreign currency in limited regions rather than on creating universal economic policies through reformation and opening. Central economic development zones are separated legally from the surrounding regions in terms of industrial infrastructure, transit infrastructure, and infrastructure for everyday life. These zones are under the control of central management. The right to inspect major tourist zones is held by the supervision and control organs to keep members of the public away.

### **South Korea at a Turning Point**

The premise under which North Korea may become a "normal state" rests on recovering trust and joining international society. It is important for North Korea to keep its promises, recover trust in its relationships with other states, stop its chronic buck-passing, and remain accountable for its actions. States can only develop and innovate when they adhere to certain tenets, such as keeping promises, engendering trust, and operating within fair rules of competition and reform. South Korea must play the role of leading North Korea to adhere to such rules.

It is a fact that national interest is the main driver in the policymaking process. South Korea's policy towards North Korea must prioritize diplomacy based on a combination of pragmatism and pressure ahead of peace. Pragmatic diplomacy is defined in this case as policy driven by South Korea's interests. Pressure diplomacy place an emphasis on the urgent goal of changing North Korea's Constitution. If North Korea can alter its usual strategy of "agree first, renege later," then it will be possible to realize the vision of economic cooperation, peace, and denuclearization. While North Korea continues to exchange strategic interests with China and Russia, South Korea's autonomous diplomacy is suffering under pressure from the US, China, and North Korea. Because of this, South Korea must change its foreign policy strategy.

- *Chae-Yeon Kang* is a professor at the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, Seoul National University. Her major research areas are North Korean Political Economy, Inter-Korean Relations, Unification Policy, and Social Integration. Her recent articles include “North Korea’s Military First Politics and the ‘Bureaucratic Market Economy’” (2019) and “A Cycle Model of North Korean Power Succession-Explaining the Regime’s Working Mechanism” (2018).

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“Between Pyongyang, Beijing, Moscow, and Kim Jong Un” 979-11-88772-84-1 95340

Date of Issue: 26 June 2019

Typesetting: Jinkyung Baek

For inquiries:

Jinkyung Baek, Research Associate/Project Manager  
North Korea and National Security Research Group  
Asia Democracy Research Group

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209)

[j.baek@eai.or.kr](mailto:j.baek@eai.or.kr)

The East Asia Institute  
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,  
Seoul 04548, South Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697