



# Thinking Slow about North Korea

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## Thinking Fast and Slow

In his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman, 2002 Nobel Laureate in Economics, explained two systems by which we think: System 1 and System 2. System 1 is a fast, intuitive and emotional way of thinking, operating automatically with little effort and no voluntary control. On the other hand, System 2 is a slow, lazy and logical way of thinking that requires intentional and effortful mental activities. According to Kahneman, we are vulnerable to a cognitive bias of thinking fast and are likely to be strongly influenced first by System 1.

Regarding the North Korean issue, thinking fast is common both at home and abroad. This is because, despite the importance of the North Korean issue, there is a lack of information on North Korea and a flooding of disinformation. When Chairman Kim Jong-un disappears for a few weeks, impromptu analysis and interpretation of the possibility of the collapse of the North Korean system outpour. When North Korea conducts a nuclear test, discussions on North Korea's nuclear capabilities and threats are active. It is also important to analyze the changes in North Korea's major exports and rice prices at Jangmadang within a short period of time. It is also true that the North Korean issue often requires urgency, and in cases where a quick response is needed, the need to rely on intuition increases. However, it is important to understand the structure of the North Korean regime, the changes that are taking place in the long term, and the key variables. Given the importance of the North Korean issue, it is clear that thinking fast is a critical and necessary task.

However, it is necessary to think as slow as we think fast. That is why Kahneman's argument about thinking slowly is important for studies on North Korea.

### **North Korea has existed as a dictatorship for 75 years**

Looking back on North Korea's 75-year history since 1945, it can be seen that North Korea has made great efforts with regard to regime stability. North Korean leaders have appeared to be men of a long-term and cautious national strategy, and not reckless men of impulse. They have been evil but very good at calculating their benefits and costs and clear in understanding North Korea's place in the world. Seventy years under Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and a quite stable leadership succession to Kim Jong-un clearly show the durability of the North Korean system. The leaders know how to control the nation as dictators. They are malign but not mad, rather quite rational in calculation. In this sense, Kim Jong-un is not an exception. If he were a reckless man, he would more likely gamble. But since he is not reckless, he has shown capability of calculating the benefits and costs.

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many observers predicted that the Kim Il-sung regime would not survive. When Kim Il-sung died in 1994, they also speculated that the regime would collapse soon because no one could replace him in North Korea. However, Kim Jong-il had little difficulty in succeeding to his power. During the period of "Arduous March" in the mid-1990s, many predicted again that the Kim Jong-il regime would not survive. After Kim Jong-il died in 2011, they believed that Kim Jong-un, then a 27 year-old young and inexperienced leader, would not be able to save the regime. However, none of the predictions have been realized. Many unification scenarios by the U.S. and South Korea are based on the regime collapse of North Korea. However, there has been no report of the North Korean regime being threatened by a popular revolution or by a military coup.

With North Korea being a typical dictatorship, Kim Jong-un has made use of the dictator's control toolbox. In order to prevent military coup, Kim Jong-un, like his grandfather and father, has heavily relied on security forces, restrictive social policies, manipulation of ideas and information. Even if the military conducts a coup, it would be very difficult for them to take power in North Korea because they do not have political legitimacy. Kim Jong-un has executed many military and political figures throughout the last 8 years, even killing his uncle. If Kim Jong-un had failed in consolidating his power, he could not have executed him.

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**North Korea will continue to exist as a nation.**

Diverse predictions on Kim Jong-un's recent absence seemed to be based on disinformation on North Korea and on a certain group's wishful thinking. Even if Kim Jong-un dies suddenly, North Korea is more likely to continue existing as a nation. A new leader or power group may emerge by force or claim power with the support of the North Korean people. It is possible that a new leader or power group may rise after a series of fierce power struggles and replace the Kim Jong-un regime. According to a high-ranking North Korean defector, Kim Yo-jong and Kim Jong-chul—Kim Jong-un's younger sister and elder brother—may cooperate with each other to stabilize the North Korean domestic situation even when Kim Jong-un is unable to sustain his power.<sup>1</sup> Since North Korea is de facto Kim's dynasty, the North Korean people have not yet had the opportunity to experience democracy. Therefore, it is not strange for Kim Jong-il's son and daughter to become North Korea's leaders. In a democratic country like South Korea, a national leader's political legitimacy is derived from elections and popular support. But in North Korea, political legitimacy is based on the Kim family's Baekdu bloodline.

If North Korea's domestic situation is stabilized, there is no reason for China and Russia to disapprove its new regime. The two countries support the continuation of North Korea rather than its regime collapse, and will welcome the rise of a new leader—whoever it may be—and support the rebuilding of a new regime in North Korea. They may accept North Korea's regime collapse, but not the collapse of North Korea as a nation. Both China and Russia would not like to see North Korea's regime collapse lead to the unification on the Korean Peninsula under the U.S. and South Korean leadership.

In this sense, North Korea's time-horizon is long and appears to be longer than we may expect. That is why it is important to think slowly when dealing with the North Korean issue. There are many factors that we overlook when thinking fast about North Korea. Since North Korea recognized itself as a de facto nuclear weapons state when it declared it completed nuclear deterrence in 2017, there have not yet thought slow about how the situation on the Korean Peninsula is likely to change. We have not yet thought slow about how denuclearization and peace regime talks are likely to proceed since they have remained stagnant after the 2019 Panmunjom summit. COVID-19 is fundamentally changing the world order, but we have not yet thought slow enough about how the pandemic is affecting North Korea. U.S.-China relations are changing rapidly,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted by the author.

but we have not thought slow enough about how this will affect the Korean Peninsula. This is why it is more urgent to think slow about North Korea despite the spread of disinformation and some wishful-thinking.

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