

JOHN DELURY

North Korea in 2020

In Search of Health and Power

ABSTRACT

North Korea slogged through 2020 in an effort to maintain public health and state power. Kim Jong Un's hopes for an economic breakthrough were dashed by the COVID-19 outbreak in neighboring China, which posed an existential threat given the DPRK's limited healthcare resources. Although swift sealing of borders helped prevent a crisis, keeping the country on national quarantine took a heavy toll. Information about internal developments was scarce this year, as demonstrated by the global media's frenzied speculation in the spring that Kim Jong Un had died. Kim did scale down his public appearances, but convened frequent sessions of the ruling Politburo, often to complain about Party failings, and his sister Kim Yo Jong elevated her profile with tough messages for Seoul and Washington. North Korea remained inwardly focused to the end of the year, rebuffing South Korean entreaties at cooperation and ignoring the presidential election in the United States.

KEYWORDS: North Korea, Kim Jong Un, pandemic, self-reliance, Kim Yo Jong

AFTER MIDNIGHT, Kim Jong Un addressed the crowd assembled in the cavernous square below to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the ruling Korean Workers Party on October 10, 2020. The Supreme Leader's voice quavered and eyes moistened as he thanked the masses for surviving an arduous year

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with their health intact, while he criticized Party leadership, himself included, for falling short. The mood lightened as Kim Il Sung Square was flooded with a parade of advanced weaponry, culminating in the “huge nuclear strategic forces on which hinge the authority and security of our great state and people” (KCNA October 10, 2020). These two faces of the October parade—Kim’s weapons and his tears—were like a performance of the fundamental contradiction of 21st century North Korea, the world’s ninth nuclear power and one of Asia’s poorest nations. Kim promises to resolve the paradox, but once again he failed to find a path to prosperity.

Last year’s failure, at least, was hardly Kim’s alone. The coronavirus pandemic that erupted in neighboring China shut down much of the global economy and posed an existential threat to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), making anti-pandemic efforts the top priority all year. It was not, as planned, a year of progress toward wealth and power, but rather, a struggle to maintain public health—without yielding an inch in the power of the state.

OUTBREAK NEXT-DOOR

For the first time since assuming leadership eight years earlier, Kim Jong Un skipped delivering a New Year’s Day address. In its place as the guiding statement for the year, propaganda organs relied upon Kim’s speech to the Central Committee’s Fifth Plenum at the end of December 2019. In it, he offered little hope for progress in talks with the United States, promising to unveil a “new strategic weapon” and hinting at an end to his moratorium on testing (KCNA January 4, 2020). To counteract pressure from protracted sanctions, Kim emphasized the need for a “frontal breakthrough” in economic development; he followed up the speech by visiting a chemical fertilizer factory in a push to promote the Ci chemical industry as a “self-reliant” source of energy. At lunar New Year’s celebrations, he appeared with aunt Kim Kyong Hui for the first time in six years since the execution of her husband Jang Song Taek on treason charges, hinting at a possible healing of factional wounds.

By then, an epidemic was spreading out of control next-door in China. Sharing a porous 1,200-kilometer border, North Korea was extremely vulnerable to the ravages of COVID-19, given its limited healthcare resources. The threat was taken seriously from early on. Even before the lockdown of

the Chinese city of Wuhan, the pandemic's epicenter, foreign tour operators were told the North Korea border was closed, and one week later, authorities implemented an emergency anti-epidemic protocol nationwide. The degree of transparency and cooperation with Beijing is hard to determine, but Kim sent an aid package to Xi Jinping on February 1 "to render help even a bit" (KCNA February 1, 2020). Ahead of most countries, North Korea imposed a quarantine requiring 30-day isolation upon entry from abroad. As almost all air travel was suspended, even COVID-related international humanitarian assistance would have a hard time getting in. Domestically, hundreds of small mobile medical teams investigated possible cases, checkpoints monitored the public for symptoms, and community van broadcasts raised the alarm. As the pandemic spread, widespread disbelief met North Korea's claims to be COVID-free. But border controls and neighborhood mobilization—areas of expertise for the security apparatus—may in fact have prevented large-scale outbreaks, if not quite ensuring complete prevention.

MISSILEMEN IN SURGICAL MASKS

As South Korea emerged as a COVID hotspot in late February, Kim Jong Un convened his Politburo and read them the riot act, warning of corruption in the top ranks. Kim then kicked off his springtime rite of guiding military exercises, starting with the bombardment of an islet in Wonsan harbor. He appeared flanked by officers in black masks, potent symbols of the new imperative of health and power. Kim directed the first (short-range) ballistic missile tests in four months, while his sister Kim Yo Jong released a harsh attack on Seoul for stoking an arms race (KCNA March 3, 2020). In fact, the South Korean military was preparing to conduct a series of weapons tests in March, including its new Hyunmoo-4 ballistic missile with a range of 800 km. But as his sister blasted Seoul, Chairman Kim sent a conciliatory letter to South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who was busy trying to prevent the city of Daegu from becoming a second Wuhan. Around the same time, Kim received a friendly note from US President Donald Trump offering help in fighting the "China virus"—a gesture that would appear ironic in retrospect as the US became ground zero of the pandemic.

Kim made numerous appearances overseeing weapons tests and war games throughout March and early April, observing mortar-men on the firing range and assault aircraft flying in formation. But to demonstrate that he

considered “people’s life and health as the most important state affair,” Kim also announced grand plans for a state-of-the-art medical facility, Pyongyang General Hospital, to be built in time for the October 10 Party anniversary (KCNA April 3, 2020). Virus fears did not force cancellation of the annual gathering of the Supreme People’s Assembly, where the Cabinet was scolded for “serious mistakes” and instructed to abide by the principle of “subordinating everything to the health and safety of the people” (KCNA April 13, 2020). The Assembly approved a 7% increase in public health spending and kept the defense budget flat. Reflecting an ongoing reshuffle of senior officials, nearly half of the ruling State Affairs Commission was replaced, including ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and security.

In the absence of international summits or intercontinental ballistic missile tests, North Korea received minimal attention until April 15, when Kim Jong Un’s no-show at his grandfather’s birthday memorial triggered a global media frenzy. An anonymous source told the underground media outlet Daily NK that Kim was recovering from heart surgery, which was enough for social media and the news networks to light a bonfire of speculation on succession contingencies (Ha 2020). Kim put an end to the greatly exaggerated reports of his own death by returning to the fertilizer factory, of all places, on May Day to declare the “first victory” in the campaign for “frontal breakthrough” (the second victory would be the hospital). But Kim then reverted to a low public profile, going weeks without attending large events. With COVID-19 cluster outbreaks in the Russian Far East and Chinese northeast, Kim may have simply been “socially distancing.” He did break isolation later in May to lead the Central Military Commission, which, quite ominously, approved policies for “further increasing the nuclear war deterrence” (KCNA May 24, 2020).

PSYWAR

In the interpretation of North Korean behavior, it is not always easy to discern genuine umbrage from feigned outrage. So it was in the beginning of June when Kim Yo Jong issued another denunciation of South Korea, this time for allowing anti-DPRK balloon launches along the DMZ. Anger over subversive leaflets by defector and human rights groups may have been pretext for venting deeper frustration with the South. Although President Moon talked up inter-Korean cooperation, his government was actively

bolstering defense—in part to protect the ROK-US alliance from the hostility of Donald Trump. The recent election of outspoken North Korean defectors to the South's National Assembly may have been another trigger for Pyongyang's fury. Whatever the true motive, North Korea went into overdrive with mass rallies denouncing defectors as "human scum." Kim Yo Jong ordered the demolition of the inter-Korean liaison office building in Kaesong, and almost 20 years to the day since the first summit between the two Koreas, Pyongyang was literally blowing up the channels to Seoul.

In all the growling against the South, there was one dog that never barked: Kim Jong Un kept his silence. Indeed, Kim de-escalated the situation on June 23 by ordering his troops to suspend plans for imminent military action (a move reminiscent of his decision in August 2017 not to test-fire missiles near the US territory of Guam). Despite more balloon launches, the mass campaign quietly died down (in December, the South's National Assembly passed an amendment to the Inter-Korean Relations Act banning psychological warfare techniques like leaflet scattering). Top economic officials Pak Pong Ju and Kim Jae Ryong crisscrossed the country talking about the "food problem" and looking for ways to make up the energy shortfall. When the Politburo met on July 3, Kim Jong Un was unhappy again, delivering a "sharp criticism" for failures in the anti-pandemic work and warning of the "unimaginable and irretrievable crisis" should their preventive efforts fall short (KCNA, July 3, 2020).

Rumors would later surface of a two-line struggle in the summer between advocates of diplomacy and their hardline critics (Jang 2020). If true, Kim Yo Jong appears to have enjoyed the final word by releasing a verdict on the stalled negotiations with Washington. Although Trump was spared the kind of venom unleashed on Moon, Kim stressed the difference between the friendly "personal" relationship with Trump as opposed to the hostile posture of the US as a whole. She maintained there would be no going back to the February 2019 Hanoi Summit negotiating framework of trading sanctions relief for nuclear dismantlement. Instead, the US would have to come to the table with new proposals to eliminate its "hostile policy" toward the DPRK. Until then, there was nothing to discuss (KCNA July 10, 2020). Kim Jong Un followed up with a statement of his own—not in words, but by releasing photographs of a "closed session" of the Central Military Commission where he was briefed by his top nuclear weapons officials.

TWIN CRISES

Over the summer, Kim Jong Un remained focused on domestic challenges to public health rather than diplomatic negotiations or power politics. His inspection visit to Pyongyang General Hospital did not go well, eliciting a “severe rebuke” of Party officials for careless and corrupt project financing. A week later, Kim called an emergency session of the Politburo to deal with a new crisis at Kaesong. According to North Korean media, a defector who voluntarily snuck back from the South into Kaesong city was suspected of carrying the coronavirus. Kaesong was put under lockdown for the next three weeks and vigilance heightened nationwide. And then came the floods.

Torrential rains began pounding the Korean Peninsula in early August, the start of a prolonged summer of extreme weather events. Kim made a disaster relief visit to a hard-hit county in North Hwanghae Province, striking a populist pose by sitting in the driver’s seat of his SUV as locals crowded around. He told the Politburo to figure out how to overcome “two crises” of pandemic and floods. Kim Jae Ryong’s brief tenure as premier ended, replaced by another 50-something technocrat named Kim Tok Hun. At a follow-up Central Committee plenum, Kim announced his plan to hold a Party Congress in January 2021. Party Congresses were convened episodically six times by Kim Il Sung and not at all by Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Un seems to want to hold a congress every five years (as in China) and link it to long-term economic planning. The Central Committee openly acknowledged that the development goals set by the 7th Congress in 2016 would not be achieved. Growth was “seriously delayed and the people’s living standard not been improved remarkably” (KCNA August 20, 2020). It would be up to the 8th Congress to come up with a new plan.

In the meantime, typhoons battered North Korea one after the other. Kim made a disaster relief visit to South Hamgyong Province, where he wrote an emotive open letter to Party members back in Pyongyang urging them to volunteer for reconstruction efforts in the provinces. He ordered the Central Military Commission to direct relief efforts in the mining towns of the Komdok region (rich in rare earth deposits) and then returned to North Hwanghae Province to check up on rebuilding. The Politburo, meeting for the sixth time in just four months, warned against “self-complacency, carelessness, irresponsibility and slackness” and gave instructions for further toughening anti-pandemic measures (KCNA September 30, 2020). The

toughness, if not barbarity, of the border closure policy was demonstrated on September 21, when a North Korean patrol in the West Sea shot an interloper on a flotation device, incinerating it and possibly his corpse. The man turned out to be a South Korean fisheries official who may have intended to defect, although his family denied that was the case. Kim Jong Un again played a conciliatory role, apologizing over the incident. However, after a year of harsh public statements, blowing up the liaison building, and rebuffing offers of cooperation, the incident left a bitter taste for the South Korean public.

80-DAY BATTLE

Although Kim was mostly focused on domestic affairs, he conducted letter diplomacy with key leaders. In early September, Kim exchanged warm messages of encouragement with Moon as they both fought the “two crises.” Then at the beginning of October he sent a congratulatory note to Xi Jinping on China’s national day and condolence card to Donald and Melania Trump after they tested positive for COVID-19. As the long-awaited day of the parade approached, top military officers Ri Pyong Chol and Pak Jong Chon received promotion to the rank of marshal, a very rare honor in the Korean People’s Army (the last time was just prior to the 7th Congress in 2016). Marshals Ri and Pak were prominently featured in the October 10th Parade, watching as Chairman Kim criticized himself: “Our people have placed trust, as high as sky and as deep as sea, on me, but I have failed to always live up to it satisfactorily. I am really sorry for that.” Kim promised to protect the country’s health and power, going so far as to say the people’s “good health means the very existence of our Party, state and everything on this land” (KCNA October 10, 2020).

The quality and quantity of weapons on parade stunned analysts in terms of sophistication. But once the celebrations ended, Kim took a trip back to the Komdok mining region and despaired at the conditions: “We have to seriously self-reproach ourselves for making the workers in Komdok live in such a backward living environment.” Continuing on to another relief site, he bemoaned the “wicked and shameless violation of law” in the construction work and promised strict consequences for offending cadres. Propaganda organs turned up the volume on a new production campaign, the 80-Day Battle, as if exhortation could solve the country’s economic problems.

By the close of a year that made the whole world feel like a patchwork of “hermit kingdoms,” North Korea had virtually sealed its borders, sacrificing

essential trade with China and critical assistance from international organizations. The small foreign presence of diplomats and aid workers in Pyongyang dwindled almost to nil, as did the outward flow of defectors to South Korea, rendering it that much harder to get a sense of developments inside the DPRK. Propaganda organs spent the final month of the year trumpeting success in the 80-day economic campaign, marveling how Komdok's villages had been rebuilt into a "socialist fairyland" (KCNA November 27, 2020). But South Korean intelligence reported currency fluctuations and price instability as the strict national lockdown combined with unremitting international sanctions to put North Korea's "self-reliant economy" to the ultimate test. Kim Jong Un emerged for yet another Politburo meeting in late November and for mourning at his father's mausoleum in mid-December, keeping his messages domestically focused. Even when US presidential candidate Joe Biden referred to Kim a "thug" in the debate, Pyongyang stayed mum. Contrary to many predictions, Kim offered no "October surprise" to Trump nor did he stage a "provocation" in the wake of Biden's electoral victory. With a historic Party Congress scheduled for January, Kim appeared content to wait for the blank canvas of a new calendar year to send any important signals abroad. If 2019 had been a year of strategic adjustment, 2020 was a year of basic survival, sheltering a vulnerable population from a once-in-a-century pandemic, tightening political controls, and projecting strength toward the outside world despite ongoing privation at home.

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