

Articles

The Kim Jong-il Regime's “Military-first Politics”: Structure and Strategy of Discourse

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1. Introduction

In a New Year's Day editorial in 2009, the North Korean government re-declared their country a "military-oriented nation" and appealed to the people to stand together for the national aim of becoming a "powerful and prosperous nation" on the world stage. The government, declaring that they were entering a new era of "military-first politics," tried to justify the leadership of Kim Jong-il's regime and his governance of North Korea based on a "military-first policy."

According to the North Korean government, military-first politics (Seongun jeongchi) commenced on the first day of 1995. Thereafter, political discourse has been revised and developed in North Korean society, accompanied by the development of a series of slogans such as "reformative spirit of the military," "military-first politics," "military-first political line," "the military-first ideology," and the "military-first period," all of which have been the result of the adoption of military-first discourse. As this military-first political discourse occupied so many social communications, the relevant terms also developed into a sort of normative language in North Korean society, dominating all aspects of social life under the Kim Jong-il regime.

There have been many studies of military-first politics, which can primarily be placed into three categories according to their research focus. First, there are studies on the characteristics of the power structure of military-first politics, which pay great attention to the relationships and their changes within the tripartite power structure of North Korea – the Worker's Party, the cabinet and the People's Army (Choe Jin-uk 2001; Jeong Seong-jang 2001; Jo Yeongkuk, 2006) – second, some scholars have focused on both domestic and foreign aspects of the military-first politics (Kim Kap-sik 2005); lastly, there has been research into the ideological features of military-first politics, and the question of whether it is a replacement of the Juche ideology or a practical sub-ideology serving to realize Juche (Yi Ki-dong 2005; Gwak Seung-ji 2000).

Since the North Korean government's declaration of the commencement of military-first politics, however, research into the policy in South Korean academic circles has been restricted to a handful of topics. The main reason for this, I believe, is that the ideology is still in the process of development: the regime first devised the slogan, and gradually refined and elaborated the ideology. However, under Kim Jong-il's regime, the military-first policy has become an ideology, to which the entirety of North Korean society has been conformed. Now the discourse of the military-first

policy has developed in political, social and military levels having produced a new ethos in North Korea. This paper, therefore, will place its focus on the ideological characteristics, especially the structure and strategy of the discourse of military-first politics, which has steadily expanded into almost all sectors of North Korean society.

2. The Birth of Military-first Politics

Following the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in the late twentieth century, North Korea has faced a new crisis. Unlike other communist countries, North Korea had established a political structure of self-reliance, *Juche*, and was able to survive the ideological crisis. It seems obvious that the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist Eastern European countries on the North Korean leadership was immense. After learning of the collapse, Kim Jong-il's regime was obliged to redirect its survival strategy, creating the military-first policy. In short, the realization of the collapse of the Communist Bloc led North Korea to decide on a new political strategy and new policies for its survival as a communist nation.

In North Korea's understanding of the reasons behind the collapse of their allies, it was not the failure of economic policies, but the regimes' failure to establish and maintain a firm ideology to manage their societies that resulted in their downfall. It was also believed that the infiltration of capitalism, policies of reform and opening to the free market accelerated the collapse of communism in many countries.

“We must not be blinded by the imperialists' slogans of ‘reform’ or ‘opening’.
That is the path to death; we must not allow it into our nation” (Kim Jong-il
2000b: 458).

Another understanding of the collapse of communism, according to Kim Jong-il, was a military issue. He believed that the poor military capacity of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries contributed to the fall of their regimes (Jeong Man-ho 2004: 3). Kim also felt that if the military authorities in those countries had responded successfully to the political groups that had become unfaithful to the system when it was facing economic weakness, the regimes could have survived.

The new international politics following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1991 also had a serious impact on North Korea, forcing it to consider its plans

for how to survive in a changing world where the hegemony of the United States seemed to be growing exceedingly powerful. As one of few countries to stand up against the world order driven by American hegemony, North Korea perceived the situation to be more threatening to its survival than to that of any other country in the world.

Additionally, the fall of the communist countries caused the economic isolation of North Korea. As those countries changed from communist to capitalist economic systems, they ceased trade and business relationships with North Korea, bringing about serious economic hardship. The stagnation and innate limitations of the North Korean economy were a serious problem. For Kim Jong-il's regime, which initiated its control over North Korea at the culmination of a domestic and international political and economic crisis unlike anything that the country had ever experienced, an urgent response was critical; otherwise, there would be no guarantee of survival for the regime or for North Korea itself. From 1990 on, North Korea registered negative economic growth, and for the most part the changes developed against the background of the unprecedented famine that led to an estimated 600 to 900 thousand deaths (Andrei Lankov 2009: 23).

According to North Korea's official account, Kim Jong-il initiated military-first politics on Jan.1, 1995 when he expressed "his will for military-first politics aimed at completing the Juche-oriented revolutionary task, with the People's Army as the pillar of the revolution and the main driving force of revolution" while visiting the guard post, Tabaksol (Choe Ki-whan 2003: 48). The North, however, once maintained that the political formula originated in a speech delivered by Kim in October 1994. North Korea has recently begun to explain that military-first politics dates from the late 1960s when there was an intense struggle between the North and the United States, and then formulated a system in the mid-1990s (Kang Hee-bong 2008: 2).

It was not until Jan. 1, 1997 that the North's discourse for military-first politics emerged concretely in a speech made by Kim Jong-il that day. Kim said:

"Various socialist countries have collapsed, with no bullet shot, because they were not furnished with strong troops. There will be no people, no socialist country and no Communist Party if they are not furnished with a strong army at a time when they are constructing a socialist society under siege and threat of the imperialists. The army equals the Party, the state and the people" (Kim Jong-il 2000a: 267).

Between 1995 and 2001, Kim made guidance visits to 1,300 units, 814 of them army units, commencing with a visit to the Tabaksol guard post (Choe Ki-whan 2003:48). Under a constitutional revision in the first session of the 10th Supreme People's Assembly held in September 1998, North Korea established the state political system valuing military affairs, raising the status and increasing the authority of the National Defense Commission significantly. Before the constitutional amendment, the commission was placed below the SPA, the SPA Presidium and the Central People's Committee. The revised constitution, however, placed the NDC immediately below the SPA and above the SPA Presidium, the cabinet, local governments and judicial and prosecutorial offices of its legal status, mission and authority (Kim Chol-u 2004:23).

3. Structure of Discourse for Military-first Politics

1) Relationship between the Military-first Ideology and the Juche Idea

The North Korean regime faced the important task of clarifying the relationship between the Juche idea and the military-first politics, plus the military-first ideology, as its works regarding the discourse for military-first politics and the military-first ideology made progress. North Korea watchers in South Korea have raised various questions and put forth an array of opinions regarding relations between the Juche idea and military-first ideology while watching the development of the North's discourse for the military-first guidelines.

Some see that the North Korea has attempted to replace the Juche idea with the military-first ideology as its guiding ideology since the inauguration of the Kim Jong-il regime, while others argue that the North continues to maintain the Juche idea as its guiding ideology and that military-first ideology serves simply as a practical means. Undoubtedly, it was burdensome for North Korean ideology as a guiding ideology at a time when the Juche idea remained as an absolute, unique ideology in the country. For this reason, apparently, they began efforts to clarify relations between military-first politics and the Juche idea around 2003 when the discourse for the military-first principle proliferated in the country.¹

1. The fact that moves to clarify relations between the military-first politics and the Juche idea were

North Korea has said military-first politics and military-first ideology have their roots in the Juche idea. A North Korean thesis said in its preface that the Juche idea, as in the past, will be a guiding ideology for the North, stressing that the military-first ideology is based on the Juche idea (Ho Chol-su 2004: 2). In other words, it indicates that the military-first ideology as a guideline for North Korea today is a practical ideology for realizing the Juche idea. Kim Jong-il also clarified this point.

“We must make Party members and workers understand that the creative principle of the ‘military-first principal,’ which rules that the army equals the Party, the state and the people, is based on the Juche idea” (Choe Song-hak 2002: 10).

First of all, according to North’s account, military-first politics is a political formula based on the Juche idea and the goal of military-first politics is to fully meet the demand of the Juche idea.

“As shown in the practical experience of our revolution, military-first politics is a political formula with the Juche idea as its guideline, which was created in the course of pushing ahead with revolution in our own way, and is the most powerful political formula, which fully meets the fundamental demand of the Juche idea. It became invincible politics, which can guarantee the eventual victory of the great Juche-oriented revolutionary cause. It also is a great system of politics, which is effective for solving any problem regarding revolution and construction” (Kim Ryong-jin 2004: 10).

How did the North Korean ideologues produce evidence to verify their assertion that military-first politics has roots in the Juche idea? According to them, military-first politics is based on the philosophical principal of the Juche idea that “man is the master of everything,” with “the realization of independence of the public mass” as its central proposition. In other words, they argue that the public should initially be furnished with revolutionary armed forces that are necessary to safeguard themselves as they push ahead with revolution and development independently to meet their

made at a time when such terminology as “the military-first ideology” and “the military-first era” was proliferating, indicates that the North was faced with a task to prevent the public perception of a conflict between the military-first ideology and the Juche idea while spreading the political discourse for the military-first ideology.

demands and interest and solve all problems for themselves, and the military-first principle originates in this precept of the Juche idea. They also maintain that "military first" is the tenet which was "created in the course of practical struggles for revolution in our own way, using the Juche idea as a guideline" (Choe Sung-hak 2002: 12).

They say that the military-first politics is aimed at valuing military affairs, giving priority to them and realizing the independence of the public. People can safeguard their independent rights only when they depend on strong revolutionary armed forces because revolution requires confrontations of power between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, according to them.

Second, the North Korean ideologues emphasize the military-first politics realize the principle of the Juche idea that the public is furnished with the power to push ahead with revolution and development. They say that the military-first politics realizes the Juche principle under which the public pushes ahead with revolution and development for themselves, putting priority on reinforcing the People's Army to increase the revolutionary ability and creative power of army and thus strengthening the power of the public, with the army as a model.

Third, the military-first politics is the political formula aimed at realizing thoroughly the guideline of the Juche idea, which calls for the maintenance of an independent position and the creative methods in carrying out revolution and construction, according to the North's account. The military power should be strong so the public can maintain its independent position on revolution and construction, become the master of the regime, and deal with all problems according to their views and judgment, the North argues.

The second and third arguments are a repeat of first, in terms of reasoning and terminology, and the probability is somewhat abstract in nature. The concept of independence, however, presented as a core factor in these arguments, seems to be somewhat valid as the ideological base of military-first politics because military-first politics identifies struggles against imperialists as its prime objectives.

There is little trouble in understanding the relationship between the military-first politics and Juche idea because North Korea has set the Juche idea as the ideological root of military-first politics. Under this theoretical frame, how can the North explain the relations between the military-first ideology and the Juche idea?

There are some specific points in the North's discourse for the military-first principle. First of all, there is a clear relationship between the military-first politics and the military-first ideology as statements explaining military-first politics are

also used to expound the military-first ideology. In the course of developing the discourse for the military-first principle, North Korea has used the term “the military-first ideology” far less than the term “the military-first politics,” and in many cases, the definition of the “military-first ideology” has been unclear.² It was in 2001 that the terminology, “the military-first ideology,” appeared in the *Rodong Sinmun* for the first time, but it was not until 2003 that the annual joint editorial on New Year’s Day mentioned the military-first ideology. The editorial carried that day in newspapers published by the Party, the army and the Kimilsung Youth League mentioned “the military-first ideology” once in 2003, four times in 2004, five times in 2005 and once in 2006.

Yet it has used the term “the military-first ideology,” together with “the military-first revolutionary ideology.” It may be burdensome for North Korean ideologues to mention “the military-first ideology,” as it indicates North Korea is in the initial stage of developing an independent ideological system for the Kim Jong-il era.³

Actually, North Korea defines military-first politics clearly as Kim Jong-il’s political formula, but military-first ideology as Kim Il-sung’s idea as shown in the following two quotes.

“While succeeding the military-first revolutionary leadership incessantly, Dear General Kim Jong-il has said that there is peace and socialist above guns, presented the creative military-first principle and further developed great leader’s military-first ideology based on the principle” (Ri Son-nyo 2004: 12).

“The military-first ideology, which was presented by the Great Leader and developed and completed by the Dear General is a great, systematic ideology developed from the military-first principle that the army equals the Party, the state and the people” (Ho Chol-su 2004: 2).

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3. This process resembles the process of developing the theoretical system of the Juche idea.

Kimilsung Socialist League. The term, however, was found in an article carried in the *Rodong Sinmun*, organ of the party, on April 9, 2001, under the title, "Nobody can challenge our sovereignty and dignity because the Great General exists." The article was to mark the eighth anniversary of Kim's inauguration as chairman of the National Defense Commission. It was on April 25 that year that this term appeared in an editorial of the newspaper, under the heading, "Let us demonstrate our all-victorious might under the flag of the great military-first ideology." The editorial did not expressly define the military-first ideology but connected it with what it called the military-first ideology.

It is noteworthy that the editorial set the military-first ideology as a doctrine preceding military-first politics.

"Great Leader Kim Il-sung founded the army on a basis of the military-first ideology earlier than any other institutions and opened a new way to push ahead with revolution, with the army as its main driving forces. This indicates the outstanding features of his greatness and achievements... Our army and people will glorify forever the Great Leader's achievement of founding the army under the military-first ideology and the leadership of Dear Supreme Commander, comrade Kim Jong-il, and will complete the great Juche-oriented revolutionary cause to the last, with invincible military power" (*The Rodong Sinmun*, April 25, 2001).

Since the emergence of the term, "the military-first ideology," North Korea has mentioned the content of the "military-first principle," "military-first politics" and the "military-first revolutionary ideology" under the same logic. It also has said that the military-first ideology is based on the Juche idea. A North Korean ideologue asserted lately that Juche idea was the leading idea that lighted up people's prospects, on the other hand, the military-first ideology was an idea of how they would arrive at that purpose (Kang Hee-bong 2008: 15). These remarks revealed that the military-first ideology was a practical idea for realization of the Juche ideology.

North Korea is likely to flesh out the logical frame of the military-first ideology. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the process of developing the framework of the military-first ideology to justify the political formula of the Kim Jong-il regime is still underway. In recent months, North Korea has turned its program for educating the public in the military-first ideology into a socio-political campaign.

2) The Theory of a Main Driving Force for Revolution

Kim Jong-il mentioned a “main driving force of revolution,” in his speech to officials of the Workers’ Party Central Committee in March 1997. He declared that the People’s Army was the main driving force of revolution and the pillar of the country, stressing that the whole society should learn from the revolutionary spirit of the soldiers. While providing a concrete framework for the military-first politics thereafter, North Korea faced a situation under which it was required to clarify the meaning of the main driving force of revolution. For this reason, the North began to present a theory of “the army first, the working-class next,” which set up the army as the main revolutionary force. While mentioning the theory of the main driving force of revolution concretely in March 2003, Kim Jong-il declared that the question of the main revolutionary force was clarified scientifically through the military-first politics, displaying the creative nature of military-first politics.

“Our Party, for the first time in the history of revolutionary movement, presented the theory of the army first, working class next, and set up the People’s Army as the core troop and the main driving force of evolution, based on an in-depth examination of the development of the era and the changed social class relations. The creative nature and invincible power of the military-first politics lies in that it has the People’s Army as the core and main element.”(Kim Jong-il 2005: 356)

North Korea defines the phrase, “army first, working class next,” as follows:

“The term, ‘the army first and the working class next’ means that the army is in the force-front of the struggles for revolution, followed by the working class. In other words, the army is placed before the working class in carrying out the great socialist cause” (Choi KI-whan 2003: 27).

North Korea praises itself for this development as “the result of an effort to apply a new principle to revolution in a way to reject any orthodox attitude toward the preceding theories and any revisionist distortion of the development of revolution” (Kim Jong-il 2005: 359).

What difference is there between the North’s new theory of the main revolutionary force and Karl Marx’s theory, which set the working class as the main

driving force of revolution? Kim Jong-il views the discrepancy as ascribable to the difference in time and social environments. He argued that in the mid-19th century, the working class, the most advanced and revolutionary class, was entrusted with a mission to remove the domination of capital and various systems for exploitation, and that this has been recognized as a rule for socialist revolution and construction.

He also maintained, however, that theories and rules that are over 150 years old are not suitable for the current reality. For this reason, he said, answers to the question of the main driving force of revolution cannot be fixed regardless of the era and the nature of society, and that question cannot be resolved on a basis of only class relations. He further argued that the preceding theories viewed the People's Army simply as a means of realizing policy and not as the entity furnished with the political ability to carry out revolution, and that this is the weakest point of Marxism-Leninism.

As for the inevitability of the appearance of a new main driving force of revolution today, he pointed out that the status of the working class as the main revolutionary group changed remarkably in terms of the social environments they face and class relations. In other words, he posits that the 20th century was an era of the manufacturing industry, while the 21st century is an era for the information industry in which the members of the working class are becoming intellectuals, and that the workers can no longer be viewed as the class with no property, because of their changed living conditions. The working class was viewed in the past as the main driving force of revolution because, according to the theorist, they were more interested in shattering the capitalist exploitation system than others and were the group which was most revolutionary, systematic and disciplinary.

This logic is closely related to the way the North set the objective of revolution. In Marxism, the mission of the working class to play a pivotal role as the main revolutionary body is at the center of the theory of communist revolution for the abolition of capitalism and the construction of a communist society. Nevertheless, North Korea today names "the anti-imperialist military frontline" as "the basic frontline of revolution."

"The confrontation between us and the imperialism is the confrontation of power, and the anti-imperialist military frontline because our basic frontline of revolution and the most important lifeline of our revolution, which regards the life or death of our country and nation, plus socialism" (Kim Jong-il 2005: 355).

More specifically, North Korea views the object in its struggles for safeguarding its on breed of socialism and its sovereignty as “the U.S. imperialist,” and the group that can carry out the task is the People’s Army. The North defined the confrontation between socialism and imperialism as a politico-ideological and military confrontation as well as a confrontation of power, and views that political sovereignty of the country and nation can be safeguarded only by strong military power (Ri Chang-sik 2004: 12).

For this reason, according to the North, the changed environments and the situation facing the country today call for the manifestation of a new main driving force of revolution, which is necessary for making the public, who oppose the domination of the monopolistic capital and capitalist invasion, conscious and systematic and which reinforces their revolutionary capacity.

3) The Philosophical Basis of Military-first Politics

In the course of providing the theoretical frame of the military-first politics, North Korea began to mention “the philosophy of the gun,” indicating that the political formula is based on that philosophy.

“The military-first politics of our party is based on the philosophy which rules that the revolution is explored, advanced and completed depending on the gun” (Jong Man-ho 2004: 2).

A joint editorial on New Year’s Day in 2000 presented as an important object of party programs “a task to realize the ideology attaching importance to the gun.” It declared that valuing the gun is a strategic goal to be upheld as far as imperialism exists and revolution continues, and is a state affair that should be given top priority (*Rodong Sinmun*, Jan.1, 2000). Thereafter North Korea renamed the ideology the “gun-valuing philosophy,” saying: “The gun is the weapon of the class, revolution and justice and the gun as the lasting companion of the revolutionaries does not betray its owner even at a time when all things in the world change” (Kim Chol-u 2000: 57).

It defines the gun as the “revolutionary armed forces whose basic unit is the revolutionary army.” In other words, the gun means military power, including the revolutionary army. The military-first politics and military-first affairs, with the army as the main driving force of revolution, while the gun-oriented philosophy states that the war potential is the first requirement for the victory of revolution.

Accordingly, the gun-oriented philosophy provides the theoretical base for military-first politics to focus on reinforcing military power.

The North, of course, propagates that the gun-valuing philosophy is furnished with philosophical substance, which defines "the quintessence of the gun." This indicates the simple structure found in the discourse of the North's own style.

"The gun-oriented philosophy of our Party has newly clarified the principle of revolution that is pioneered, advanced and completed depending on the gun, and the military-first principle of revolution that is pioneered, advanced and completed depending on the gun. The military-first principle which rules the army equals the Party, the state and the people, and the principle of valuing military affairs under which the state places top priority on military affairs" (O Song-il 2003: 4).

It is noteworthy that North Korea, while explaining the gun-oriented philosophy, is repeating the terminology used for the discourse for the principle of valuing military affairs: "the principle of the revolution that is pioneered, advanced and completed depending on the gun," "the military-first principle which rules the army equals the Party, the state and the people," and "the principle of valuing military affairs under which the state places top priority on military affairs."

Also noteworthy is the North's mention of the distinction between socialism of its own style and socialism prevalent worldwide in the past, aimed at applying the gun-oriented philosophy to its theory of revolution. In other words, the North claims that the revolution theory of Marxism failed to present the question regarding the status and role of the gun simply as an important practical question and that it presented a fragmentary view of the gun, viewing it as the most effective means of violence. The North also argues that various socialist countries failed to reinforce the gun and increase its role, simply viewing the gun as a means of defense while applying Marxism in an orthodox way and ultimately failing to safeguard their socialist systems.

The North Koreans further emphasize the inevitabilities of the military-first politics, justifying the belief that they can win out in struggles with the imperialist only by means of reinforcing the military power and ability to wage battles. In summation, the gun-oriented philosophy provides the theoretical base for the Kim Jong-il regime's military-first politics to focus on the reinforcement of military power.

4. The Role of Military-first Discourse

1) Defending North's Regime and Building a "Powerful and Prosperous Nation"

According to a North Korean declaration, military-first politics began in the mid-1990s in response to the hostile foreign policies towards the Communist Bloc pursued by imperialists such as the United States and its allies, and was completely in place by the "arduous march" (*gonanui haenggun*). This period, as both North Korea and the outside world recognized, was quite critical for the survival of North Korea. It was urgent for Kim Jong-il's regime to "defend its political system and the safety of North Korea from imperialist capitalism." The government tried to assure the people that when the survival of socialism was secured, resolving other issues including economic problems would be just a matter of time. Kim strongly believed that when a country's military power is great, an enemy nation would not even think of doing it harm: a lesson learned from the fall of socialism in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

"We can see that the fate of socialism assuredly depends on whether we have a strong military" (Kim Jong-il 2000a: 267).

North Korean leaders believe that if they possess strong military power, they can restore their nation even if the government fails to respond to hostility from the outside world. If, however, they do not maintain such a military force they cannot ensure the safety of the socialism that was built with their blood and hardship (O Seong-kil 2003: 21). In a speech in 2003 Kim emphasized the role of military power: "If we had not made our military stronger than before, we would have certainly perished by now" (Kim Jong-il 2005: 357).

Aware that the United States would be a potential threat to North Korea, the regime set up its deterrent nuclear power strategy against the United States as the most urgent priority for national defense. As part of the national agenda to strengthen military power, military-first politics was called on to serve as the fundamental ideology in domestic politics. The military-first politics gained dominance in the national agenda following a speech made by Kim Jong-il in October 1997, where he said that "No matter how difficult the economic situation is, strengthen the military first, labor later."

The military-first politics represented a dual strategy aimed at pursuing the security of the regime as well as economic growth. A central concept in this agenda was a "powerful and prosperous nation." The heavy reliance on the military indicated that the army was the main driving force of building such a nation. Therefore, military power would be utilized to overcome economic difficulties and secure the regime. Kim considered his military threats to be bargaining chips with which he could procure economic aid and security guarantees from the United States. Additionally, North Korea has begun to clash with the U.S. and the international community by pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

While North Korea declared that the priority of the country in the mid-1990s was to defend socialism and the political system, Kim's regime also focused its national capacity on the development of the socialist economy, to which the military was also expected to contribute. Propaganda was aimed at building a multi-functional military which could take part in a number of multi-level social projects, not exclusively charged with the responsibility of national defense, as it was believed that one of the critical reasons for the failure of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries in eastern Europe was the failure of their military complex to be involved in any social reforms or management. Therefore, the military authority, in addition to its role in national defense, should also play a pivotal part in increasing national power by involving itself in economic activities (O Seong-kil 2003: 52).

In the mid-1990s, North Korea suffered from loose governance owing to serious economic problems. In this state of affairs, it was unavoidable for military personnel to get involved in economic recovery projects. The period, called the "war without gunfire," was quite harsh for the people, and a breakthrough was needed. The answer lay in the military; the regime started to use military human resources for economic recovery projects.

In getting through the "arduous march" (1995-1997) the government devised an ideal model of the military spirit. It was from 1996 that discourse about the reformative military spirit started to be mentioned in public and the regime started to enact nationwide enterprises such as power plant development, public works and other economic recovery projects.⁴

The army began to participate even more in social and economic decision-making, from large-scale infrastructure development to providing its own food. The army is now not such a heavy economic burden, and it serves as an important resource

4. It was not until 1996 that *Rodong Sinmun* started carry issue of military first- related articles or editorial. Thirty-four articles were carried in 1996.

and catalyst for developing the national economy (Alexander V. Vorontsov 2009).

Military personnel were sent out to the engineering and public works frontier with the purpose of encouraging people to do their duties properly. During this period, many construction projects were completed: ground was broken at Anbyeon Youth Power Plant in September 1996 and work concluded in October 2000; chicken, ostrich and catfish breeding farms, pharmacy and porcelain product lines and more followed. As a way to promote economic activity, the government chose the military as a main player, first, because the military was the easiest organization to mobilize for the national agenda. North Korea aims to become a powerful and prosperous nation,⁵ and the military has a pivotal role to make that dream a reality. The military-first policy can contribute to the North's economic development both directly and indirectly.

2) Consolidation of Kim Jong-il's leadership

The military-first policy functioned as a keystone of Kim Jong-il's leadership. Coming into office at a time of hardship in both the economic and political areas caused by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, and with a weak ideological background in comparison with the previous leader, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il needed to become another political icon if he was to lead the entirety of North Korean society. His solution was the creation of the military first policy.

The editorial board of *Rodong Sinmun* in June 1999 laid the foundations for Kim's regime: "the military-first policy depends absolutely on Kim Jong-il's extraordinary leadership, which does not allow any other competitors" (*Rodong Sinmun*, June 16, 1999). As Kim Il-sung had been the founder of the Juche idea, and at the same time the ideology had functioned as the fundamental social compass in North Korea, so was the military-first policy for Kim Jong Il's regime. The Juche ideology was replaced as the principal rule of governance by military-first politics.

In propaganda for the new Kim's leadership, the government promoted the idea that he was an exceptional character, an iron hero, and the paramount commander of the People's Army, brimming with human virtue. He was also described as an extraordinary man with "remarkable military vision," "incomparable visceral courage"... "iron belief and will," "unshakeable decision," "unlimited commitment to his country"... "unending loyalty to Kim Il-sung," and so forth

5. The phrase "powerful and prosperous nation" (Gangseong daeguk) made its debut in North Korea in January 1999.

(Kim Cheol-u 2000: 276-374).

It was also announced that Kim was the founder of the “the army first, working class next” policy which was devised to put him in the position of supreme leader of North Korea. It was because Kim Il-sung was iconized as the founder of the Juche ideology, the principal national management philosophy, that he had been praised as everlasting father of North Korea, not merely because he was a political leader who governed at a certain period.

The North Korean government claimed that the policy of transforming the People’s Army into a pivotal force for the purpose of the communist revolution was a new interpretation of materialist class relationships by Kim Jong-il, and it was called a “historic event.” Kim Jong-il was now promoted from a position of inheritor of the Juche Ideology founded by his father to the position of founder of a new ideology, a step which helped him establish his own leadership which had hitherto been overshadowed by his predecessor.

Kim’s other important measure to strengthen his control of North Korea was his move to secure domination over the army. Having been fully aware of the process of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and former Soviet Union, he witnessed that the armies of the communist countries failed to function well to protect the system at critical points, and at times even turned their back on the system, accelerating the process of collapse. He seemed to have decided against the concept of the political neutrality of the military, and tried to invoke the call that the army should always stand by him. Through the military-first policy he tried to give the army more power, but at the same time, he wanted to control it more effectively and not to allow it to become alienated from the system at any critical point.

Besides his role as the first secretary of the ruling Worker’s Party Kim Jong-il succeeded in his efforts to exert control over the military. The government also admitted that Kim’s policy had enhanced the position of the military and helped them extend their activities throughout North Korean society (Kim Chol-u 2000: 34). Lastly, Kim appointed the Korean People’s Army (KPA) as his favored bodyguard. Domestically and internationally, he needed to complement his leadership with a firm hold on the KPA, and in this, he succeeded.

As the military-first politics gained strength among the people, the government started to propagandize with such slogans as “union in unified heart,” or “solid spirit to guard our leader,” giving emphasis to the emotion that they should be ready even to sacrifice their life in order to protect the leader’s authority and physical body, as well as promote his ideas and achievements.

The aim of establishing the idea of “solid spirit to guard our leader” anywhere and anytime, appeared to secure Kim’s leadership physically and politically. It seems to have been evoked especially by the U.S. attack on Iraq and the arrest of the former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, which I think surely gave a profound feeling of peril to the leaders of the North Korean government including Kim Jong-il himself. In other words, the response of the North Korean government to international politics after the armed intervention of the U.S. in Iraq was a reflection of their fear they also could be attacked and deposed, so for Kim to have the military play the role of bodyguard in the discourse of the military-first politics was the most reasonable choice at the time.

During his fifteen-year rule, Kim has used the military doctrine to cement his power. Furthermore, the military-first policy has bolstered Kim’s succession. Indeed, leadership succession may be one of the most profound political challenges facing the North Korean political system. North Korea may follow the pattern by which Kim Jong-il took over from his father Kim Il-sung, and name one of his sons as successor.⁶ North Korean ideologues maintained that socialism broke down in East European countries, because they failed to solve the question of succession, while in North Korea socialism has been “ever victorious” because the North has managed to solve that question. Therefore, it is possible that North Korea aimed at justifying Kim Jong-il’s hereditary power succession. Military-first politics operated to manage the unstable situation that power succession brought about and military-first ideology was used as a sort of theory of succession. Military-first as a social ideology could reinforce the legitimacy of Kim’s successor. Furthermore, the military is collectively and indivisibly loyal to their eternal leadership. The norms and beliefs that are deeply entrenched in military-first ideology will be all absolute unity and loyalty to Kim Jong-il and his son (Han S. Park 2009). As the Juche idea has created a system where the will and guidance of Kim Il-sung has remained alive for the last several decades, the military-first ideology justify a system where Kim Jong-il would be remain “eternal” leader through hereditary power succession .

3) Control over the Population and Socialist Moral Rearmament of the People

As the economic situation worsened after 1996, the party’s control over the people

6. Recent media reports suggest that Kim’s third son, Kim Jong-un, has been designated the heir apparent. Kim’s health concerns may have sped up the timing.

diminished. Because of the economic hardship in the 1990s, the center has suffered significant losses in resources and instruments for penetration and control of lower units. With vanishing economic surpluses concentrated at the center, this could not supply adequate resources to maintain a normal management level of the firms and organizations along the hierarchical plan command system. Consequently, the center could not penetrate and control the daily activities of individuals as it had before (Park Hyeong-jung 2004: 154). North Korea's control over its society generally loosened during the "arduous march"(gonanui haenggun).

The economic reform measures in July 2002 have attempted to both reserve and reform the socialist economy to the new conditions and environment surrounding North Korea. Although still a socialist economy in principle, capitalist elements are gradually taking root in North Korea. Nevertheless, the introduction of a market economy gave rise to social tension. Aware of the fast-spreading interest in capitalism among the people, the government chose to respond with a policy of socialist moral rearmament. Since the late 1990s, following the establishment of economic relations with South Korea, the North Korean government kept watch for any sign of the influx of capitalist culture into North Korean society. In a New Year's Day editorial, "Being alert against the dust of capitalism," the North Korean government asserted, "We should set up a strong screen not allowing any enemy to violate our socialist values, and keep up the alert against any enemy attempt to destroy our culture and values."

In the mid-2000s, the government launched a social program to encourage people to rearm themselves at an ideological level. The New Year editorial in 2006 announced:

"The challenge of world politics requires us to continue our ideological rearmament. We need to educate all the members of the People's Party as well as the workers in the idea of the military first policy and help them to be revolutionary players." (*Rodong Sinmun*, 1st, January, 2006).

This announcement gives us a hint of the policies the North Korean government aimed at encouraging society to develop a revolutionary spirit and ideology; they practiced propaganda the concepts of "revolutionary", "organization", "order", etc. The People's Army serves as a model and an inspiration to the civilian population, who are urged to emulate revolutionary military spirit and fighting style of the People's Army.

When the North Korean government claimed that all civil, military and council sectors should tightly stand together around Kim Jong-il and show the world the power of military-first politics, their consciousness of the need for social unity to go through political and security issue. They even emphasized that the civilian ideological tie with the military correspondents is stronger than nuclear weapons against the enemy.

5. Conclusion

After his successful ascension to supreme power, Kim Jong-il assembled a system of military-first politics to legitimate his control over North Korean society. As the discourse system grew from a military-first politics to a concrete political formula called “the military-first formula,” North Korean ideologues were tasked with providing a valid logic regarding the origin of the military-first politics and forming a logical framework for politics subsequent to the year 2000, following a series of discussions on this matter.

North Korea maintains that it established the military-first politics as a political formula during the “arduous march,” but that it took root during “the pioneering period of revolution.” New ideological development was founded on awareness of the need for a strong military, which could support the survival of the system of a nation even when the economy fell into a fatal state.

Now the discourse of the military-first policy has developed in political, social and military levels having produced a new ethos in North Korea. The concept of military-first replaces the proletariat and the vanguard Communist Party with the armed forces as the driving force in society. Steadily, the rhetoric of military-first politics spread into every social, political, cultural sector becoming a principal ruling philosophy. It has functioned as a kind of cure-all. Recently, being combined with the iconizing process, the military-first policy faces a new phase. Nevertheless, if this process of ideologization to legitimate Kim’s regime grows in intensity, it would be an obstacle against the social advancement of North Korea. Recently it is also pursuing an education program for the military-first ideology while stating, “It is a new higher step for reforms in humanity to arm all members of society with a firm belief in the military-first ideology in society, which is meant to establish the ideology as a norm.”

Kim Jong-il adopted military-first politics as a guideline for domestic

governance and foreign policy. Kim Jong-il is attempting to maintain the existing order, to strengthen his regime based on personal authority, and consolidate control of military force while preventing an overthrow of the state. Now military-first politics is touted as a key instrument for building a "powerful and prosperous nation" (kangsong taeguk). North Korea aims to become both powerful and prosperous, and expects the military policy to play a pivotal role in making that dream come true.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the ideological characteristics, structure and strategy of discourse on the “military-first politics” that has gradually expanded into almost all sectors of North Korean society. After successful ascension to supreme authority, Kim Jong-il’s regime set up “military-first politics” to legitimate his control over North Korean society. As the discourse system grew from military-first politics into a concrete political precept called “the military-first formula,” North Korean ideologues were tasked with providing a valid logic regarding the origin of the military-first politics and forming a logical framework for politics after the year 2000. Now the discourse of the “military-first policy” has developed in political, social and military arenas having produced a new ethos in North Korea. Gradually, the rhetoric of military-first politics spread into every social, political, and cultural sector to become the primary ruling philosophy of North Korea.

Keywords: North Korea, military-first politics, military-first ideology, Kim Jong-il, political discourse, Juche ideology.