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Issue Brief

The Geopolitics of North Korea's *Juche* Ideology under Kim Jong-un

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S*ummary*

The *Juche* ideology has been central to North Korea's political system. This idea was promoted by the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, and the goal was to attain national self-reliance. Paradoxically, North Korea remained heavily dependent on foreign aid for its economic development during the Cold War period. In recent months, Pyongyang has rejected humanitarian aid even from its close allies.

Introduction

The socialist system in North Korea, apart from the dynastic transfer of power, has also promoted the idea of *Juche*, which basically means self-reliance. The *Juche* doctrine was given by Kim Il-sung in 1955, which gave emphasis to indigenisation of economic production and autonomy in foreign affairs.¹ However, during the Cold War, North Korea remained heavily dependent on foreign aid for the survival of its regime since its establishment on 9 September 1948. The Soviet aid to North Korea also helped Pyongyang overcome devastations caused by the Korean War (1950–1953) and facilitated rapid industrialisation of this isolated state.²

In the post-Cold War period, the emphasis on *Juche* has been the key factor behind North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme.³ In the realm of economic development, North Korea did not liberalise its economy and the reclusive state remained largely closed for foreign investment. Despite rich in natural resources, North Korea’s aversion to economic liberalisation made it one of the poorest countries in the world. The advent of Kim Jong-un to power in 2011 raised hopes for the introduction of more liberal policies in the North Korean economic and political system due to his alleged exposure to Western education and lifestyle.

However, the current regime under Kim Jong-un appears to be no different from his predecessors and it continues to follow the earlier policies with regard to economic development and nuclear weapons programme.⁴ Since coming to power, Kim Jong-un has purged his close associates, and has advanced the nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles development programmes. In the milieu of COVID-19 pandemic and economic difficulties, Kim urged the people of his country to strive for *Juche*.⁵ In the recent months, despite devastating floods in the country, Pyongyang refused all offers of international aid for the flood victims, including those from its close allies like China and Russia.⁶

¹ B.C. Koh, “[North Korea and Its Quest for Autonomy](#)”, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 3/4, Autumn, 1965–Winter, 1965–1966, pp. 294–306.

² Erik van Ree, “[The Limits of Juche: North Korea’s Dependence on Soviet Industrial Aid, 1953–76](#)”, *The Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1989, pp. 50–73.

³ Edward Howell, “[The Juche H-Bomb? North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and Regime-State Survival](#)”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 4, July 2020, pp. 1051–1068.

⁴ Yong Soo Park, “[Policies and Ideologies of the Kim Jong-Un Regime in North Korea: Theoretical Implications](#)”, *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2014, pp. 1–14.

⁵ Reuters, “[North Korea’s Kim Pushes Self-Reliance amid ‘Worst Difficulties’](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 29 March 2022.

⁶ Yonhap, “[N. Korean Leader Rejects International Aid to Deal with Flood Damage](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 10 August 2024.

Juche Idea and Kim Jong-un

The idea of *Juche* has its origins in certain traditional Korean cultural practices, such as Confucianism and the *Cheondogyo* religion.⁷ However, in North Korea, it became a political ideology of the state and was promoted by the ‘eternal leader’ Kim Il-sung during the Cold War period to attain independence and self-reliance. The concept of *Juche* has been explained by a North Korean scholar in the following words: “The *Juche* idea is based on the philosophical principle that the masses of the people are the masters and driving force of the revolution and construction.”⁸ In fact, the emphasis on *Juche* was also a strategy to strengthen the hold of Kim dynasty regime in North Korea and gain legitimacy from the masses.⁹ In the realm of foreign affairs, despite having close alliance with Beijing and Moscow, North Korea chose to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1975.¹⁰ Notably, *Juche* idea generated a strong sense of nationalistic ethos, pride and cultural identity among the North Korean people.

The current regime in North Korea under the leadership of Kim Jong-un appears to have revived the idea of *Juche*. This is also evident from the ‘*Byungjin* policy’ of Pyongyang for the simultaneous development of both military and economy. In the realm of military preparedness, North Korea under Kim Jong-un has focused on the indigenisation of defence production. Since 2011, North Korea has tested nuclear devices four times and has launched numerous ballistic missiles. In August 2024, North Korea inaugurated 250 new-types of missile launchers which were reported to have been indigenously produced and have helped the country to achieve self-reliance in building a “modern *Juche*-oriented army”.¹¹ Remarkably, this new weapon system of North Korea could pose serious security challenges to South Korea.¹²

The North Korean regime under Kim Jong-un has also been focusing on the economic development of the country and mitigating the regional disparities. In

⁷ Sergei O. Kurbanov, “[North Korea’s *Juche* Ideology: Indigenous Communism or Traditional Thought?](#)”, *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2019, pp. 296–305.

⁸ Han Su Yong, “*Juche* Idea”, in Kim Ji Ho (ed.), Kim Yong Nam and Ri Chung Hyon (trans.), [Understanding Korea: 3 Politics](#), Pyongyang, North Korea, Foreign Languages Publishing House, *Juche* 105, 2016, p. 2.

⁹ Sung Chull Kim, “[Juche Idea: Base of Regime Legitimation of North Korea in the Age of Decaying Socialism](#)”, *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 1, 1992, pp. 151–174.

¹⁰ R.R. Krishnan, “[North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement](#)”, *International Studies*, Vol. 20, 1981, pp. 301–302.

¹¹ “[Commissioning Ceremony of Ultimate Weaponry Demonstrating Sure Victory of Cause of Building Powerful Army](#)”, KCNA, 5 August 2024.

¹² Lee Hyo-jin, “[N. Korea’s 250 New Missile Launchers Could Overwhelm South’s Defense: Experts](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 5 August 2024.

2024, the North Korean government launched the ‘Regional Development 20×10 Policy’ which aims to modernise 20 cities and counties each year within a plan period of 10 years.¹³ In his recent visit to a regional industrial development project, the need for a “Juche-based idea of architectural aesthetics” was highlighted by Kim Jong-un.¹⁴ The economic sanctions imposed by the international community on North Korea due to its nuclear and missile programmes had been hindering the international trade of Pyongyang which has probably pushed the North Korean regime to promote domestic consumption and put emphasis on economic nationalism.

Recent Floods in North Korea and *Juche* Idea

The recent floods in North Korea badly affected the north-western provinces of the country, such as North Phyongan, Jagang and Ryanggang. The flood waters inundated thousands of homes and made a significant number of people homeless. A large area of agricultural land also came under the flood waters, destroying the agricultural produce. The devastations caused by the flood led to the declaration of “special-level disaster emergency areas” by the North Korean government.¹⁵ Kim Jong-un visited the flood-affected regions and met people whose houses were damaged by the flood.

The North Korean leadership took note of the severity of the flood situation and threatened to take severe action against officials who ignored the rehabilitation work in flood-hit areas.¹⁶ Subsequently, it was reported that at least 30 North Korean officials had been executed due to the damage caused by the floods.¹⁷ Kim Jong-un even came down heavily on the South Korean media for allegedly spreading “false rumour” and “smear campaign” against North Korea regarding the number of deaths and accidents that occurred due to the floods in the country.¹⁸ However, the Ministry of Unification of South Korea criticised the North Korean

¹³ [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Guides Consultative Meeting for Regional Development Project”](#), KCNA, 2 September 2024.

¹⁴ [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Gives Field Guidance at Regional-Industry Factories Under Construction in Hamju County”](#), KCNA, 2 September 2024.

¹⁵ Political News Team, [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Flood-hit Areas in City of Sinuiju and Uiju County of North Phyongan Province”](#), *Rodong Sinmun*, 29 July 2024.

¹⁶ [“22nd Emergency Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of Eighth WPK Central Committee Held”](#), KCNA, 31 July 2024.

¹⁷ HT News Desk, [“North Korea Executes Around 30 Govt Officials after Deadly Floods and Landslides: Report”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 4 September 2024.

¹⁸ [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Pays Congratulatory Visit to Helicopter Unit of KPA Air Force”](#), KCNA, 3 August 2024.

leadership from diverting attention of the public from the damages caused by the floods and unnecessarily blaming South Korea.¹⁹

Interestingly, the paranoid North Korean state media was relatively more transparent about the devastations caused by the recent floods.²⁰ As the media coverage of the floods generated international sympathy for the flood victims, neighbouring countries such as South Korea, China and Russia, and some international organisations offered humanitarian aid to North Korea. However, the Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang rejected all offers for foreign aid. Instead, the North Korean state media called for the construction of ‘Socialist Paradises’ in the flood-affected areas and strive for “self-sustenance and self-reliance”.²¹

Geopolitics and North Korea’s Refusal of Foreign Aid

The revival of *Juche* ideology under the leadership of Kim Jong-un also signals the geopolitical shift in the region. Despite several meetings between Kim and former American President Donald Trump, the relations between Pyongyang and Washington remain hostile. On the other hand, North Korea’s relations with South Korea have severely deteriorated in the recent years and Pyongyang even branded Seoul as an ‘enemy state’ in 2024. North Korea’s ties with China have also apparently strained since 2019. With Russia, North Korea has signed a new mutual defence treaty in June 2024 and has shown strong solidarity with Moscow over the ongoing war in Ukraine, but Pyongyang does not want to overburden its ally with aid. All these factors have possibly pushed North Korea to reduce dependence on foreign aid and seek self-reliance.

Failure of North Korea’s Rapprochement with the United States

The United States (US) had been the principal enemy of the North Korean regime. From the North Korean perspective, the US divided their country in 1945 for its own vested interests and destroyed North Korea during the Korean War, which ended only with an armistice and no peace agreement. The overwhelming American military support to South Korea had been threatening the existence of Kim dynasty regime in Pyongyang. The strangulating economic sanctions imposed by the US and its allies adversely affected this ‘Hermit Kingdom’.

¹⁹ Yonhap, “[N. Korea Slams S. Korea to Divert Public Attention Over Flood Damage: Unification Ministry](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 12 August 2024.

²⁰ Annabelle Liang, “[Thousands Hit by N Korea Floods as Kim Calls ‘Emergency’](#)”, *BBC*, 29 July 2024.

²¹ “[Papers Call for Building Socialist Paradises in Flood-hit Areas](#)”, *KCNA*, 1 August 2024.

However, North Korea’s past efforts for normalisation of relations with the US have met with failure. Therefore, the recent military belligerence under Kim Jong-un could probably be attributed to the failure of Pyongyang’s negotiations with the US during the tenure of various American Presidents, such as Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden.²² As a result, the focus on self-reliance could be regarded as a strategy of North Korea to overcome the damaging effects of the economic sanctions and increasing American hostility towards Pyongyang.

North Korea’s Rising Enmity with South Korea

South Korea used to be one of the biggest donors of aid to North Korea. However, the relationship between North and South Korea has reached a new low in the recent years. The reunification with Seoul is no longer the goal of Pyongyang. The peace initiative and rapprochement with North Korea made under the former South Korean President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) have been completely trashed. Since May 2024, the Kim dynasty regime in North Korea has also sent thousands of trash-laden balloons towards South Korea.

On the other hand, the South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on the occasion of the Liberation Day on 15 August 2024 launched the ‘Unification Doctrine’ to promote reunification with North Korea.²³ President Yoon has also appointed a high profile North Korean defector Tae Yong-ho in his administration, which has probably increased anxieties in Pyongyang.²⁴ In recent years, South Korea’s relations with Japan have dramatically improved and both countries have been cooperating in building stronger alliance with the US against North Korea’s rising nuclear threats.²⁵ As a result, the offer of aid from South Korea for flood victims received no response from North Korea.

North Korea’s Strained Relations with China

The close relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing is often characterised as ‘lips and teeth’. During the Korean War, North Korea received massive support from China. In 1961, both North Korea and China signed a ‘Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’. In the post-Cold War period, China became the most important ally, trade partner, source of food, energy, tourists and aid to

²² Seo Ji-Eun, “[North Vows to Strengthen Nuclear Arsenal Regardless of U.S. Election Results](#)”, *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 5 August 2024.

²³ Anna J. Park, “[Yoon’s ‘Unification Doctrine’ Aims to Reform North Korea](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 15 August 2024.

²⁴ Ji Da-gyum, “[Defectors’ Rise to High Posts in Seoul Could Shake NK Elite: Tae](#)”, *The Korea Herald*, 4 September 2024.

²⁵ Anna J. Park, “[S. Korea, US and Japan Sign Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 28 July 2024.

North Korea. However, despite being a close ally, China opposed the North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles development programmes. As a result, North Koreans have been apprehensive about Chinese role in the Korean Peninsula.²⁶

More recently, the relationship between North Korea and China appears to have strained. This is evident from the fact that there has been no meeting between Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un since 2019. Apparently, Beijing’s proposal for a huge investment in the exploration of rare earth minerals in North Korea in 2019 has not materialised.²⁷ In recent months, the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) had been keeping an eye on the deteriorating relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing as Kim Jong-un had allegedly asked North Korean diplomats posted in China to not take Beijing seriously.²⁸ Remarkably, the recent Chinese offer for aid for North Korean flood victims was not accepted by Pyongyang.

North Korea–Russia ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’

The visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to North Korea in June 2024 was the watershed moment in the history of the relationship between these two countries in the post-Cold War period. The signing of a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’ between Moscow and Pyongyang has further strengthened their military alliance.²⁹ Evidently, this pact between North Korea and Russia envisions mutual military support if either of the two countries come under foreign invasion, and also aims for cooperation in the fields of science and technology.

However, North Korea’s refusal of aid from Russia for the victims of the recent floods was indeed an interesting development. Probably, North Korea does not want to overburden an ally like Russia which is itself facing economic problems and international sanctions due to the ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022. This show of solidarity with an ally was also evident when Kim Jong-un personally reciprocated and thanked President Putin for his kind gesture of offering assistance for the flood victims.³⁰

²⁶ Kim Yoo-chul (INTERVIEW), “[China, North Korea Do Not Trust Each Other: CSIS](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 15 December 2022.

²⁷ Reuters, “[China Plans to Tap North Korean Rare Earth Mine: Report](#)”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 October 2019.

²⁸ Yonhap, “[NIS Closely Watching NK-China Ties Amid Signs of Rift](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 31 July 2024.

²⁹ Political News Team, “[Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation Signed](#)”, *Rodong Sinmun*, 20 June 2024.

³⁰ Yonhap, “[NK Leader Expresses Gratitude for Putin’s Offer of Help with Rain Damage Recovery](#)”, *The Korea Times*, 4 August 2024.

Conclusion

The North Korean political system had been deeply influenced by *Juche*. It generated intense nationalism in North Korea and provided legitimacy to the rule of Kim dynasty in the country. The emphasis on *Juche* also helped North Korea to develop quickly and emerge as a ‘role model’ for other socialist states. However, the North Korean obsession with *Juche* to make the country self-reliant had been a major impediment in the economic liberalisation of this resource-rich state. Unlike China and Vietnam which adopted market measures and have become some of the fastest developing countries of the world, North Korea still follows policies which have kept it isolated from rest of the world.

Despite the devastations caused by the recent floods in North Korea, the regime in Pyongyang refused to accept any international aid. This also points to the geopolitical shift in the region. North Korea’s relations with the US have remained hostile. Pyongyang does not want to receive any aid from China apparently due to the strained relations. North Korea’s animosity towards South Korea has been increasing. Although North Korea–Russia relations have improved, Pyongyang probably does not want to overburden Moscow with new aid. However, it would be indeed interesting to observe as to how long North Korea could maintain its zeal for *Juche* without economic liberalisation measures.

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