For decades, both North Korea and the United States have in their own way thwarted efforts to resolve the threat of a nuclearized North Korea. Both have cheated on, or failed to fulfill, past agreements to bring a halt to Pyongyang’s nuclear program.

Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea has achieved a level of nuclear and missile development that has finally caught the eye of Washington and the American public. Is peace still possible?

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Hidden Debates: The Myth of a Monolithic North Korea

By Patrick McEachern

Viewed from outside, the three generations of the Kim Dynasty in North Korea conjure up a popular image of country in the permanent grasp of one-man rule. The resulting perception is that North Korea’s political leadership is monolithic and impervious to genuine debate over policies and priorities. The reality is different, writes Patrick McEachern. In the midst of the country’s seemingly unstoppable pursuit of more capable nuclear weapons and missiles, there are those in the North Korean elite who believe a different path for the country should be pursued, if the conditions are right.

NORTH KOREA professes itself a unitary regime in the service of its leader and guided by his benevolent and sage leadership. Citizens are reminded on a daily basis that North Korea’s three hereditary leaders — Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un — are masters of everything from military tactics, philosophy and poetry to agricultural mechanics. Comments uttered by the leader during field-guidance visits have a binding effect and may influence anything from farming practices to regional development strategies for years to come. The North Korean leader wields enormous power and influence within the country and is unrivaled as the regime’s top decision-maker. By its own accounting and with a degree of truth, North Korea is a one-man regime.

However, this is only the tip of the iceberg; beneath the surface is a more complex reality. Kim Jong Un today must govern a state of over 20 million people with a variety of interests, institutions and personalities. The country faces difficult choices on national defense, including the nuclear issue, inter-Korean relations, the competition for legitimacy and economic development. Different voices within the regime have publicly and observably articulated divergent approaches to these challenges — each with their own logic. North Korea has tried these contradictory approaches and oscillated between these conflicting agendas. When we look closely, we can see that North Korea has shown a capacity for limited debate within the system on policy formulation, and pursued distinct policy strategies, indicating this internal conversation is meaningful. To be sure, the country is a highly centralized state with Kim Jong Un at the top, but he does not rule alone and without input on decisions and assistance on executing those decisions.

We should be careful not to take this argument too far. North Korea does not have opposition parties. Factions within the regime have long since been eradicated through purges, executions and co-option, and independent power centers found in other states along natural fault lines such as ethnic or religious group-based differences simply do not exist in any politically meaningful way in the country. In North Korea, regime elites influence and shape North Korean policy direction within the confines and purview of a system with Kim Jong Un firmly at its apex.

CORE ORIGINS: KIM II SUNG’S MONOLITH

North Korea’s first leader, Kim Il Sung, got his start as a nationalist guerilla commander fighting the Japanese colonialists in the 1930s and 1940s, and he serves as the model for his grandson now leading the regime. Kim Il Sung’s band of fighters reached about 300 men. He was significant enough to warrant the Japanese placing a price on his head, but peripheral enough that he survived until the Japanese defeat in the Second World War. He was not central to defeating Japan’s colonial rule of Korea and did not construct a new regime from a victor’s perch. Rather, he traveled to Pyongyang as one of several faction heads trying to build a new regime out of the rest of the 1950s to the pursuit of butter over guns, before reversing course. Kim Il Sung emerged as the top leader in North Korea and codified his position over the military, the party and the state in the North’s 1972 constitution. He was the charismatic founder of the regime, set core regime goals that persist to this day and came the closest to creating a North Korean monolith.

CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM: KIM JONG II

Contrary to the monolith preferred by his father, Kim Jong Il allowed limited debate among the
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He has submerged public debate among his political institutions but not erased contrary ideas and approaches.

Calls openly critical of the Agreed Framework and covertly started a separate, uranium enrichment program around 1998. North Korea continued to develop its long-range missile capabilities and flight-tested the Taepodong 1 rocket in 1998, which overflew Japan and generated fresh concern about this weapons delivery capability. North Korea agreed to forego flight tests in favor of diplomatic accommodation, which held for six years before contrary voices grew more persuasive in Pyongyang again.

North Korea restarted its plutonium reactor at Yongbyon in 2003 and ran it until 2007, when the regime again opted to freeze and partially dismantle the facility in favor of alternative security arrangements to be negotiated under the auspices of a peace regime, promises of diplomatic normalization and associated economic benefits, as well as sanctions relief. But this Six-Party Agreement also faltered, and North Korea restarted the plutonium reactor in 2013. The uranium enrichment program seemingly progressed unimpeded, but the regime still showed an inconsistent approach to the nuclear issue, a fact that reflected the contrary views held by North Korea’s pragmatists on the one hand and ideologues on the other.

The importance of this internal debate could likewise be seen in economic policy. Most importantly, Pyongyang instituted economic changes in July 2002 that recognized the emerging role of markets and sought to improve economic conditions — with the Cabinet Premier at the forefront and repulsing open criticisms from the party and military elite. In 2002, North Korea effectively deemphasized the role of the regime in directly providing rations to the populace, favoring instead rationalizing wages and prices to rely more on markets to distribute basic goods. This recognized changes already under way in the black market and coping mechanisms that North Koreans had instituted during the famine. The Cabinet Premier was the leading advocate and implementer of the policy that promised greater economic efficiency, but party ideologues chafed at the idea of undermining socialism and direct state control of the economy. They made moral arguments that the new system left the elderly, infirm, children or anyone who could not make money in the market at risk of losing access to food and other basic goods.

The ideologues won a partial victory in 2005 when the regime re instituted the Public Distribution System that allowed the state to directly provide certain goods, but markets had taken hold and could not be fully rolled back.

All of the above means that on the most important goals of the regime, internal debate was observable and had an impact on policy decisions. Kim Jong Il’s North Korea was not a monolithic.

**Monolithic Aspirations: Kim Jong Un**

Kim Jong Il held a weak hand, so he adopted a divide-and-rule approach that exposed deep-seated differences between North Korean institutions on the core issues facing the regime.
Faced with crisis and limited leadership qualities, Kim Jong Il survived and left his son in a much stronger position. Kim Jong Il inherited an unproven nuclear program and a credible military threat from the US, while Kim Jong Un inherited a proven nuclear weapons capability. Kim Jong Il oversaw a period in the inter-Korean rivalry when even North Korea’s closest allies and partners established diplomatic relations with South Korea; Seoul far outpaced Pyongyang on economic and democratic measures; and South Korea could credibly claim victory in the inter-Korean competition for legitimacy. Kim Jong Un did not reverse this tide but enjoyed greater distance from the sting of defeat. Kim Jong Il saw the loss of Soviet economic backing, economic collapse and famine. Kim Jong Un enjoyed anemic but mostly positive annual economic growth. Contrary to contemporary claims that Kim Jong Un faced a more difficult succession than his father due to his youth and inexperience, the younger Kim enjoyed a much stronger position than his father on the regime’s core goals.

From this position of strength, Kim Jong Un turned to his grandfather’s tougher approach and submerged the institutional debate that raged during his father’s tenure. Kim Jong Un restarted his grandfather’s charismatic leadership practice of giving a speech on New Year’s Day to lay out the regime’s priorities for the year, and restarted regular party conferences and congresses. He instructed the military to focus on national defense rather than a more comprehensive set of national policy issues, while the Cabinet’s purview also shrank back to implementing decisions made by the leader and the party.

Kim Jong Un has reasserted the active principles of unity within North Korea, but this doesn’t mean he has succeeded in creating a monolithic regime. He has submerged public debate among his political institutions but not erased contrary ideas and approaches. In the ebb and flow of North Korean politics, the party and ideologues currently have the upper hand over the technocrats and even military-based security practitioners. This is most prominently seen in national defense, where Kim Jong Un has aggressively pursued nuclear and missile development.

If history is any guide, analysts should not be so pessimistic as to believe this bleak situation is permanent. If a persuasive alternative means to provide for national security rooted in a credible peace regime arose and was combined with brighter economic prospects, there may be a chance to tap into the currently hidden but deep-rooted internal advocacy for accepting limitations on the North’s nuclear weapons program. North Korean elites do not want to give up nuclear weapons, but some may articulate again that limiting nuclear activity may be worth the gains if the price is right. North Korea has consistently valued national security benefits over economic ones and promises of sanctions relief or economic rewards would likely be insufficient to cut into a now-demonstrated nuclear weapons capability. Kim Jong Il made verifiable moves towards denuclearization that persisted for years and limited North Korea’s nuclear program, and a close look below the surface at Kim Jong Un’s regime can help decipher if the current North Korean leader may be tempted by similar trade-offs in the future.

North Korea is not a monolith. It is critical to understand that point in order to effectively address the persistent policy challenges emanating from the country.

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