

What's Not to Say About the DPRK New Year's Editorial (and why it's important!)?

by Kevin Shepard

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Pyongyang's four primary (and government-run) newspapers have printed a New Year's message from the regime every Jan. 1 since the death of Kim Il Sung, who preferred to announce each new year's policy shifts through a speech. These editorials should be seen as propaganda rather than policy, aimed primarily at the domestic audience. But, the New Year message often foreshadows policy changes and campaigns the Kim Jong-il regime plans to introduce over the next 12 months.

Overall, despite the many developments in 2010, the New Year's Joint Editorial shows no significant revision on key issues. As before, this year's article reviewed last year's "accomplishments" and then sets forth, one section at a time, the priorities of the regime. Economic reform again takes priority. Military rhetoric continues, but the concerns over the negative impact of war are consistent. Approaches to inter-Korean and international relations show no measurable change. Neither succession nor nuclear issues warrant much ink. But what this year's editorial is missing is as telling as what was written.

The first glaring omission is any mention of Kim Jong Un, third son of and expected successor to Kim Jong-il. With his quick rise to fame in 2010, the succession process might have warranted a line in the New Year's editorial. Instead, it underlines the leadership of Kim Jong-il. This, combined with the KCNA's end-of-year report on Kim Jong-il's 159 activities and recently released pictures of him using his left hand (usually seen in his pocket or by his side since his stroke in 2008), reflect a campaign to portray Kim Jong-il's strong leadership. Combine that with the omission of Kim Jong Un's birthday from the official 2011 calendars issued by Pyongyang in December, and it looks like this will be a year to let his appointments and titles soak in as he builds a reputation. That reputation is likely going to grow out of economic reform, including two production-boosting campaigns last year, increased food supplies, and the computerization of industries. Kim Jong Un has been linked to a Computer Numerical Control (CNC) system that the editorial suggests should be installed in factories throughout the country. In addition, the younger Kim has been attributed with saying food should be prioritized over bullets. Look for Kim Jong Un to be credited with more economic activity this year, but the Kim Jong-il regime will remain in control.

Second, despite last year's military provocations, this year's editorial doesn't emphasize the regime's "Military-first Politics." Instead "Songun politics" are defined as "love of the

country," and there is significantly more emphasis on the Workers' Party of Korea. The 2010 Party conference – the third ever and the first in 24 years – was "convened amidst mounting political enthusiasm" and enhanced the Party's "leadership authority to the maximum." This year, the Party is exalted, and the editorial reminds us that the Korean People's Army has a "tradition of absolutely trusting and following the Party," calling for expanding Party leadership over the military. There is no attempt to spin the Cheonan sinking or the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island for political gain or to bolster the reputation and legitimacy of anyone within the military. Rather, military actions were vaguely described as support for the Party during a "complicated situation." This emphasis on the Party is but the latest in a string of events bolstering Party politics. A more visible leadership role for the Party should help repair relations with Beijing, and could also play a role in legitimizing the succession to come.

Third, this year's editorial shows no significant change in its approach to the South. While lambasting the Lee Myung-bak administration, there has been no shift in Pyongyang's calls for dialog, exchanges, reconciliation, cooperation, and unification. The Kim regime regularly claims to be making efforts at improving ties with Seoul, but the ongoing disconnect between North Korea's calls for better inter-Korean relations and its provocations aimed at the South Korean government will lead nowhere. North Korea's similar approach to Seoul in 2010 led to broken ties and military conflict. To include the same rhetoric in the New Year's Editorial shows that Kim Jong-il has no more intention of negotiating with Seoul than he did in 2010. With Kim calling only for more of the same, rather than offering alternative paths, he will find few friends in the current ROK government. Indeed, with criticism of the Lee administration's "true colors as the minion of war and as an anti-reunification, confrontation maniac," there is little reason to expect change.

Also missing was a shift in economic policy. The editorial again focuses on self-reliant light industry and agriculture, continuing the theme of reform and the promise to improve the lives of the North Korean people. In fact, economics took top billing in the editorial's list of 2011 policies (as it did in 2010), a reflection of the priority given it by the regime. International aid agencies express concern over the North's food supplies, but the regime appears confident that feeding the people will not be a destabilizing issue. The editorial calls for implementation of agricultural plans that we've already seen, and food imports from China are up. The regime's handling of markets also reflects its confidence. Pyongyang comes down hard on markets when two things occur: either the economy recovers (and the regime attempts to reinstitute centrally planned economics), or it faces a crisis (and the regime secures food supplies). When muddling along, Pyongyang allows private trading. Since clampdowns on markets following the

failed currency reforms in December 2009, restrictions have been eased; rice and grain peddlers are back in business.

Lastly, there is no section dedicated to North Korea's nuclear programs; only one mention of the development of "nuclear technology" and a warning that war would lead to "nuclear holocaust." Pyongyang reiterated that it is "consistent in its stand and will" for denuclearization, which would indicate to anyone paying attention that it plans to consistently advance its nuclear programs. There is no mention of Six-Party Talks or the recent discussions on the return of IAEA inspectors. Kim Jong-il is not giving up this cash cow.

While the relative lack of emphasis on the military reflects domestic power politics at work, North Korea has not shifted tack on nuclear, inter-Korean, or international policies. Neither should the US and ROK. We should continue with military realignment to rectify the weaknesses highlighted by 2010 provocations, maintain a firm stance on only entering denuclearization talks after North Korea shows significant efforts and meets its agreed-to obligations, and keep pressure on China to live up to its claim of being a responsible power and use its leverage over Pyongyang. At the same time, remembering to separate North Korean citizens from the regime, we should prepare to assist in the event of humanitarian crisis or implosion of government and welcome attempts by the North to participate in the international economy and improve the lives of its citizens. This will better align us for the inevitable regime change and provide us greater leverage when the time comes to re-engage with Pyongyang.