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A Short Review on Pyongyang's Foreign-Policymaking Process

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A Short Review on Pyongyang's Foreign-Policymaking Process[†]

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Abstract

Much research and analysis has been conducted to efficiently cope with North Korea since the first nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsular in the early 1990s. However, they paid little attention to North Korea's foreign policy-making process which can be conducive to unravel the mechanism of Pyongyang's brinkmanship.

To explain Pyongyang's foreign policy-making process, a number of subjects are dealt with in this paper. First, organizations involved in North Korea's foreign policy are examined to show that the ministry of foreign affairs is the most powerful institution, but its autonomy is highly constrained. Here the role of the department of organization and direction is critical; the head of the department is Kim Jong Il himself and its far-reaching branches supervise and direct every meaningful political activity carried out in North Korea.

Second, there are three approaches to the foreign policy-making process of North Korea: "expediency of Kim Jong Il," "top down," and "bottom up." In the first case, Kim makes direct phone calls and/or visits to relevant officials, and necessary measures are taken by his instructions on the spot. In the second case, Kim presents his ideas as policy agenda and officials of the ministry of foreign affairs set concrete measures for implementation of Kim's ideas and, after Kim's review, the ideas are conveyed as "guidelines" or "teachings" of the supreme leader. The third case begins with ideas provided by officials of the ministry, and then they are reviewed and proceed through the layers of bureaucracy in the ministry. After Kim's review, it becomes a policy and will be implemented at different levels. As Kim Jong Il controls all the approaches directly or indirectly, he can be referred to as the de facto sole policy maker of foreign affairs.

Third, G. T. Allison's organization model can explain a number of distinctive features of the North Korean foreign policy-making process. In particular, the repertoires and procedures of the organization are closely directed by "the party's ten principles to establish the unitary system," "the party's covenant," and "the directions of the party." In diplomatic crisis, this delays the speed of response because they are primarily made for domestic stability and maintenance of dictatorship.

The foreign policy-making process reflects the degree of dictatorship in North Korea. As

[†] An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 4th East West Center International Graduate Student Conference in February 2005. The author would like to thank conference participants for their special interests in the North Korean issue and vigorous questions and comments which turned out to be extremely helpful in the final drafting.

long as the firm dictatorship by Kim Jong Il continues, provocative and rigid behaviors in the international arena will go on. By the same token, we cannot anticipate a progressive and flexible North Korean on the international stage, other than Kim Jong Il himself.

I. Introduction

As of February 10th in 2005, North Korea declared that it had nuclear weapons and suspended participation in the Six-party Talks, an international framework to solve the recent North Korean nuclear impasse. In retrospect, the provocative voice of Pyongyang was nothing new. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist regimes in East Europe followed by China's diplomatic normalization with South Korea, North Korea's foreign policy was seen as very hostile, and the term "brinkmanship" was commonly used to describe it.

Much research and analysis has been conducted to efficiently cope with North Korea ever since. Some of this focused on North Korea's negotiation strategy and tactics to explain the seemingly groundless audacity of Pyongyang and some emphasized sticks and carrots to coax Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambition. However, they paid little attention to explaining what is really going on in the inner circle of Pyongyang.

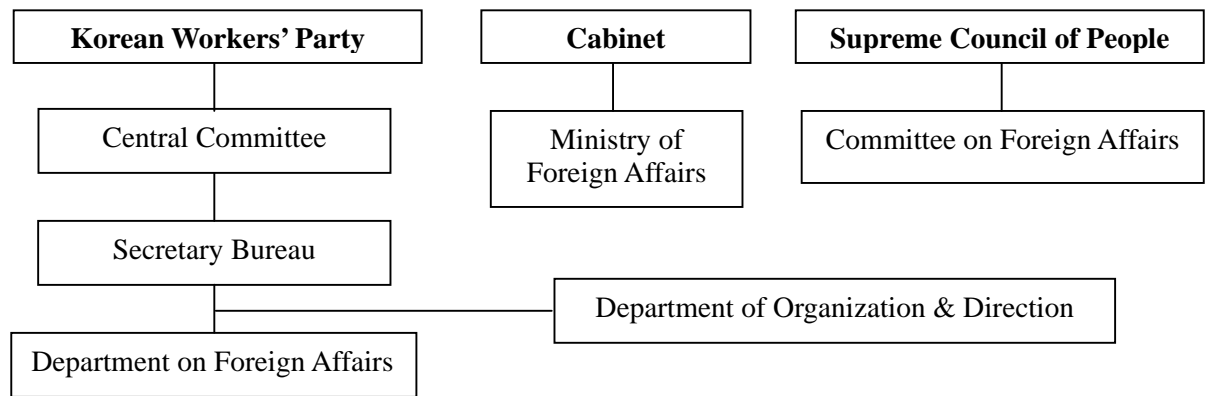
By the same token, its foreign policy making process has been regarded as insignificant as it is postulated to be similar to those of Pyongyang's counterparts in negotiation, but sober scrutiny is critical when looking into the hermit country's foreign policy-making process. It can provide us with an explanation of North Korea's rigid behaviors at the negotiation table and also the reason why carrots and sticks as used by the United States have not attained successful outcomes to end the North's belligerence. To put it briefly, the careful observation of the process will be very conducive to unravel the mechanism of Pyongyang's brinkmanship.

In this paper, a number of subjects will be dealt with to explain Pyongyang's foreign policy-making process. To begin with, organizations involved in North Korea's foreign policy making are looked at, followed by three ways of policy-making process in

Pyongyang: “expediency of Kim Jong Il”(the current supreme leader of North Korea) as well as “top down” and “bottom up.” To understand the logic of the process, “the party’s ten principles to establish the unitary system,” “the party’s covenant,” and “the directions of the party” will be examined. Then, for comparative study, we can compare the foreign policy-making process of North Korea with other countries. After that, using G. T. Allison’s three models as classic references, North Korea’s policy-making process will be evaluated.

II. North Korea’s Organizations on Foreign Affairs

<Figure 1> Pyongyang’s organizations on foreign affairs



As a socialist country, North Korea has the *de facto*, Korean Workers’ Party, of singular political leadership, and the central committee holds the *de jure* paramount power within the party. However, all the members of the central committee were defunct except for Kim Jong Il. There have been no substitutes in the membership since the 1980s and Kim Jong Il has enjoyed singular leadership of the party.¹ As a result, the secretary bureau places itself as the highest institution in dealing with administrative work both home and abroad under the sole leadership of Kim Jong Il.

The department on foreign affairs under the command of secretary of foreign affairs used to have a great degree of power which it lost in two phases. First in the early 1980s when

¹ Jong Bong Hwa, *Daegyulesu Gongjeonuro*(“From Confrontation to Coexistence”) (Seoul: Hanul, 2001), pp.62-63.

Kim Jong Il gave more power to the ministry of foreign affairs² and second in the late 1990s when Hwang Jang Yup, the then secretary of foreign affairs, defected to South Korea. Up to now the position of the secretary has been unfilled and the department wields no effectual power.

The role of the ministry of foreign affairs of the cabinet has been enhanced through these two stages. First was in the early 1980s when Kim Jong Il himself called upon information concentration for effective management of foreign affairs.³ And second in the early 1990s during the first nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula. At that time North Korean leadership gave more power to the ministry to resolve the crisis.⁴

The supreme council of the people is an equivalent of the national assembly or congress. It is supposed to represent the society or the will of the people. However, it has led just a nominal existence since Kim Il Sung's dictatorship was firmly established in the late 1950s. Therefore, the committee on foreign affairs had no real power even when it was in its early stages.⁵ Furthermore, Hwang Jang Yup was the head of the committee before he fled to Seoul in 1997.

And last but not least, the role of the department of organization and direction is highly critical in North Korea. The head of the department is Kim Jong Il himself, and all key information flows into the head of the department and its far-reaching branches supervise and direct every meaningful political activity carried out in North Korea. As for the ministry of foreign affairs, the department dispatches senior officials to the ministry in

² Kim Yong Ho, *Hyundaebukhanoegyoron* ("On North Korean Diplomacy") (Seoul: Orum, 1996), pp.80-84.

³ Yoo Ho Yul, "Bukhan Oegyojongchaekkeu gyoljonggujowa gwajong ("Decision Making Process of North Korean Foreign Policy")," Yang Sung Chul and Kang Sung Hak, eds., *Bukhan Oegyo Jongchaek* ("North Korean Foreign Policy") (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1995), pp.54-55.

⁴ Jong Gyu Sub, "Hypleokgwa Galdeungeu Daeyoejongchaek ("Foreign Policy of Cooperation and Conflict")," Park Jae Gyu, eds., *Saeroeun Bukhanilgirul Wihayue* ("For a New Reading on North Korea") (Seoul: Bupmoonsa, 2004), pp.100-103.

⁵ Ko Young Hwan, *Bukhan OegyoJongChaek Gyeoljonggigu Mit Gwajonge Gwanhan Youngu* ("A Study on the Institution and Process of Foreign Policy Making of North Korea") (Seoul, 2000), A Thesis for a Master's Degree for the Graduate School of Public Administration at Kyunghee University, pp.24-29. The author had served as a diplomat for North Korea before fleeing to South Korea in 1991.

Pyongyang and also one to two officials to every embassy or consulate.⁶

III. Kim Jong Il and the Process of Foreign Policy-making in Pyongyang

On the whole there are three approaches to the foreign policy-making process of North Korea: “expediency of Kim Jong Il,” “top down,” and “bottom up.” To start with, the “expediency of Kim Jong Il” is a unique process for policy-making in North Korea. Kim makes direct phone calls and/or visits to relevant officials often with no prior notice. His destination does not have to be the head of a department or ministry. Anyone that Kim thinks appropriate will be called upon, and necessary due measures are taken by the person. In the case of the ministry of foreign affairs, it is not unusual that Kim Yong Nam, the head of the institution, does not know the supreme leader’s communication with lower ranking officials or officials of other ministries on issues of international relations.⁷

The second process can be called “top down”: from Kim Jong Il to the subordinate. It begins with Kim Jong Il presenting his ideas as policy agenda. Then officials of the ministry of foreign affairs set concrete measures for implementation of Kim’s ideas and, after Kim’s review, the ideas are conveyed as “guidelines” or “teachings” of the supreme leader. In accordance with “the party’s ten principles to establish the unitary system” and “the party’s covenant,” they became supreme orders with no excuse allowed for refusal or adjustment.⁸ In this case, the key to success largely depends upon Kim Jong Il’s knowledge and confidence on the pertinent issue.

The third process can be referred to as “bottom up”: from the subordinate to Kim Jong Il. This process begins with ideas provided by officials of the ministry. Then, they are reviewed and proceed through the layers of bureaucracy in the ministry. Afterwards, Kim

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.31-34.

⁷ Kim Sung Chul, Tongchistylegwa Jongchichaegaegu Oonyong(“His Governing Style and Execution of Political System”), Korea Institute for National Unification, eds., *Kim Jong Il Yeongu: Leadershipgwa Sasang*(“Kim Jong Il Analysis: Leadership and Ideology”) (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2001), pp.6-7.

⁸ Kwak In Su, *Chonsunrodongdangu Dangjeokjidouguanhanonmun*(“A Study of the Party’s Guidance of the Korean Workers’ Party”) (Seoul, 2003), A Thesis for a Master’s Degree for Graduate School of North Korean Studies Kyungnam University, p.72. He served for about 15 years as a member of the Korean Workers’ Party in North Korea.

Yong Nam presides over a meeting with relevant experts. If necessary, personnel from other departments can participate in the meeting at his request. Next, he reports the results of the consultation to Kim Jong Il and, after Kim's review, it becomes a policy and will be implemented at different levels.⁹

In appearance, the third process seems to allow for more discretion of bureaucrats, but this is not the reality. Kim Jong Il commands all the formal and informal procedures to be observed in Pyongyang with the employment of "the party's ten principles to establish the unitary system," "the party's covenant," and "the directions of the party." These devices are essential in understanding the body politic of Pyongyang and, therefore, need special attention for analysis of the policy-making process in the North.

The party's ten principles to establish the unitary system were framed by Kim Jong Il and conveyed to all the party members and citizens on February 1974. All North Korean residents must memorize every single word of the principles to evade punishment.¹⁰ They were basically designed to guarantee his position as a successor to his father, Kim Il Sung, the former supreme leader who died in 1994. The following shows the primary contents of the principles.

Article 1 – we have to persist in our struggle for unitary society ruled by Kim Il Sung's revolutionary ideology

Article 2 – we have to pay great deference and loyalty to Kim Il Sung

Article 3 – we have to take the authority of Kim Il Sung as absolute

Article 4 – we have to take in Kim Il Sung's revolutionary ideology as conviction and his teachings as creed

Article 5 – we have to keep the rule of unconditional obedience to act upon Kim Il Sung's teachings

Article 6 – we have to strengthen the volitional and revolutionary unity with Kim Il Sung as the sole leader

Article 7 – we have to follow Kim Il Sung's revolutionary and communist character

Article 8 – we have to compensate for Kim Il Sung's indebtedness through the utmost loyalty

Article 9 – we have to establish rigid discipline throughout the party, nation and armed forces under the guideline of Kim Il Sung

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.73-74.

¹⁰ Ko Young Hwan, *ibid.*, pp.73-87.

Article 10 – we have to pass on to the revolutionary achievement for generations¹¹

Such words as “unitary,” “absolutely,” “unconditional,” “sole” and “rigid” represent the intention of this principle, which is above all else to strengthen dictatorship. And “for generations” in article 10 is particularly critical in two ways. First, for people in North Korea, they should be loyal from generation to generation to the supreme leader. Second, as the son of the supreme leader, Kim Jong Il, who will be the next generation supreme leader, has the same legitimacy as his father.

Also clause 1 of article 4 in the party’s covenant is as binding as the ten principles to the North Korean party members. It states as follows: “The party members shall pay indefinite loyalty to the party and the supreme leader, equip himself/herself with the party’s unitary system, think and act upon the party’s needs, and accept the party’s line and policy unconditionally for complete execution.”¹² This indicates, in a nutshell, the party members should be in absolute obedience to the supreme leader without reserve. Every important institution including the ministry of foreign affairs has the first bureau or the first department. They review all the “ideas” of the personnel to ensure that they are in strict accordance with the afore-mentioned principles and covenant.

Unlike “ideas,” the department of organization and direction observes “activities” using the so-called “directions of the party.” The standards of the directions are the party’s ten principles and the party’s covenant.¹³ The department classified the directions into these three areas. First, it superintends the bureaucrats’ daily life. Second, it makes use of personnel management as a critical tool and all the important positions in the party and state shall be approved by the head of the department, Kim Jong Il. Third, it gives special

¹¹ Hyun Sung Il, *Chosunrodongdangu Jeojikgujiowa Sahuitongjechejeae Guanhan Yeongu* (“A Study on the Structure of the North Korean Workers’ Party and its Control System over the Society”) (Seoul, 1999), A Thesis for a Master’s Degree for Graduate School of Policy Science in Hankook University of Foreign Languages, pp.131-148. He had been a diplomat in North Korea before he fled to Seoul in 1995.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.178-180.

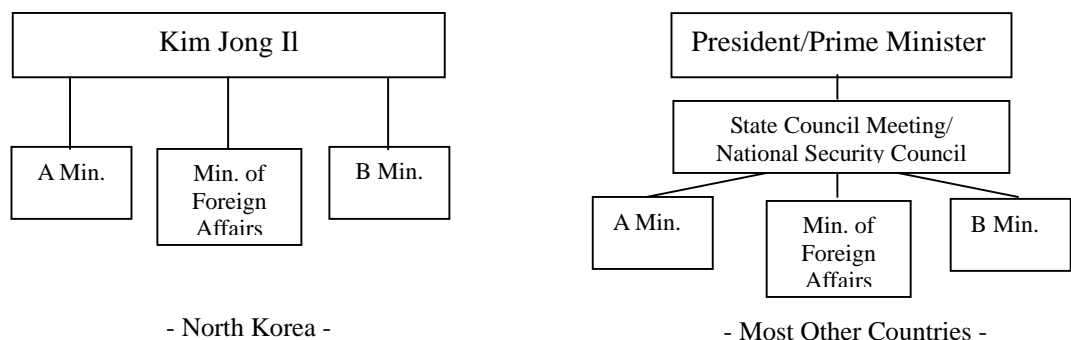
¹³ Hwang Jang Yup, *Gaeinu Sengmyungboda Guijoonghan Minjokui Sengmyung* (“More precious is national life than individual life”) (Seoul: Shidaejongshin, 1999), pp.204-209.

heed to high-ranking officials in surveillance.¹⁴ As a rule, tapping is very common and mutual observation is being carried out all the time and, as a result, all the processes are masterminded by Kim Jong Il.

In the case of expediency of Kim Jong Il, other officials can be easily misguided by Kim's monopoly on information. As for top down, Kim Jong Il is the sole arbiter and, regarding bottom up, all the rules and regulations are fashioned to strengthen the dictatorship of Kim Jong Il. Therefore the capabilities of bureaucrats in the ministry are severely constrained—no matter how smart and progressive they are—due to an information monopoly and strict surveillance.

If we compare the North Korean foreign policy-making process with that of other countries such as South Korea, Japan and the United States, we can see a remarkable contrast between them, as is shown in the figure below. Above all, each ministry in North Korea, including the ministry of foreign affairs, is connected vertically to Kim Jong Il and he controls and gives orders on an individual basis. There is no procedural occasion where the minister stands for the ministry blatantly and addresses his/her ideas to be shared by other high-ranking officials in the cabinet council. However, in the case of other countries, they normally have, say, State Council Meetings or National Security Council meetings where information is gathered, shared and integrated toward the top level.

<Figure 2> Comparison of policy-making process b/n Pyongyang and other countries



¹⁴ For more details on mutual surveillance and fear of purging amongst high-ranking officials, please refer to the following. Hyun Sung Il, *ibid.*, pp.108-116.

In this type of policy-making process, North Korea has a lot of inveterate shortfalls. For instance, communication problems between each institution are much more likely as information is not systematically integrated. There are also more possibilities to make grave mistakes because Kim Jong Il has to make all the important decisions. Besides, Kim Jong Il himself must take sole responsibility for any mistakes he might make. However, in spite of these outright defects, this policy-making process is very conducive to Kim Jong Il's dictatorship to the utmost degree.

IV. Allison's Model on Policy-making and its Application

In his book *Essence of Decision*, G. T. Allison analyzed the Cuban Missile Crisis for future research on governmental policy-making in foreign affairs. He argues that political science is saturated with rational expectation theories originating from economics and that this view assumes that nations consider all options with sufficient information and act rationally to maximize their utility. Instead, he presented three different policy-making lenses: the rational actor model, the organizational model and the governmental politics model.¹⁵

Under the rational actor model, governments are treated as the primary actor. They are presumed to be fully aware of a set of policy goals and options and pick the one that has the highest payoff. Here policy-makers take the most rational choice with all information in hand.¹⁶ According to this model, Kennedy and his advisors considered a number of options to deal with the Cuban missile crisis, ranging from doing nothing to a full invasion of Cuba. A blockade of Cuba was chosen because it would not necessarily escalate into war and would force the Soviets to make concessions.¹⁷

The organizational model, however, points out the fallibility of policy-making for these

¹⁵ Graham T. Allison, *Essence of decision: explaining the Cuban missile crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp.1-7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.10-38.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.56-62.

reasons. First, governments do not look at the crisis as a whole and, instead, break it down and allocate it in accordance with pre-established organizational lines. Second, due to constraints on time and resources, decision makers easily settle on the first proposal that "satisfyingly" addresses the issue in the short term. Third, organizations follow set repertoires and procedures when taking actions.¹⁸ Under this model, the Soviets failed to camouflage the nuclear missiles during construction because they had never established the missiles bases outside of their country before and, thus, followed their own set procedures which were not adapted to the Cuban circumstances.¹⁹

According to the governmental politics model, a nation's actions are best understood as the result of "politicking" and negotiations by its top leaders who are diverse in personal interests, backgrounds, power bases and so on. Also, because of the possibilities of miscommunication, misunderstandings and outright disagreement, different leaders may take actions that the group as a whole would not approve of.²⁰ In the crisis, for example, placing missiles in Cuba was a cheap and fast way for Khrushchev to secure his political base because the then Soviet military leaders were discontented with his decision to cut the size of the army in the midst of a nationwide economic downturn.²¹

When applying the models to the North Korean case, the organizational model can explain more than the other two models. To begin with, the rational actor model is not adequate to explain the distinctive behaviors of the North because its basic assumptions are not applied to the North Korean case. For instance, all the policy goals of Kim Jong Il are not only unequal to that of the country as a whole but also disparate in critical aspects; simply put, his goal is to secure regime survival not the general welfare of the people. Also an informational clog is more serious in North Korea compared to other countries' cases Information is not guaranteed to be systematic and well-integrated when reaching the top decision maker. Even though the volume of information in the hands of Kim Jong Il is huge, it is only relatively so; it is not because he has absolute information but because

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.67-100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.109-113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.144-184.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.243-244.

other officials' information gathering is dismally poor. Furthermore, there is a good chance that he gets more information from the officials he favors. With the existing information system, Kim Jong Il, the top policy maker on foreign affairs, cannot accumulate a sufficient degree of information both in quantity and quality.

Also, there is little room for the governmental politics model to play in Pyongyang. In North Korea, we can assume there will be conflicts of interests between sectors, such as, conflicts between the military and economic sectors or between the old power and the new power groups. Some might argue that factional models used in analyzing Chinese politics can also be applied in the North Korean case.²² However, it has been generally considered that there is no apparent sign of a faction after 1967. Since 1948 all the factions except for Kim Il Sung's had been purged. In 1967, a faction against Kim Jong Il's succession was purged and that was the last faction recorded. Of course, there can be groups whose views are dissimilar or groups with different interests but, in North Korea after 1967, it was not to a strong enough degree to form any perceptible faction. Kim Jong Il has been merciless with respect to this issue. Last year he purged his only bother-in-law and the then second-ranking big-shot Jang Sung Taek after suspicions of factionalism.

North Korea has sometimes signaled that there were conflicts between hardliners and doves as was the case in 1994. Gang Suk Ju, the then first secretary of the ministry of foreign affairs, said to his U.S. counterparts at the negotiation table that belligerent military officials did not yield to the policy made by the ministry. However, according to Ko Young Hwan, an ex-diplomat from North Korea, this was said on purpose as a negotiation tactic. He emphasizes that the consultation systems in the Eastern European socialist regimes do not exist in Pyongyang.²³

The organizational model is not entirely applied to North Korea because, say, there is no systematically guaranteed division of works and Kim Jong Il can defy all the established

²² For factional model about Chinese politics, see Andrew Nathan "A Factionalism Model for CCP Politics," *China Quarterly*, No. 53 (January-March), 1973, pp.34-66.

²³ Ko Young Hwan, *ibid.*, pp.13-14.

repertoires and procedures. However, this model can explain a number of key features of North Korean policy-making process and its rigidity. For instance, Kim Jong Il has to rely on the information accumulated from below anyhow and biased information can be the base for his policy-making. In particular, North Korean organizations are required to stick to the established repertoires and practice which incorporate “the party’s ten principles to establish the unitary system,” “the party’s covenant,” and “the directions of the party.” North Korean foreign officials hardly took ventures in policy making for fear of severe punishments even during the crisis. If they do, it is common for officials to take more hostile postures than before in line with the principles, covenant and directions. The cost of a belligerent policy has been not that severe in most cases while a conciliatory policy is likely to cost them their political life. In fact, the reward of belligerency was generous. For example, secretary Kim Yong Soon was dramatically promoted by successfully threatening Seoul and Washington to stop the joint military exercises of Team Spirit in 1992 with a number of provocative moves toward them.

Also, the department of organization and direction plays a decisive role by paying special attention to officials in foreign affairs for their strict compliance of the repertoires and procedures. As afore-mentioned, it dispatches senior officials to the ministry headquarters and one or two general officials to every embassy or consulate.²⁴ Moreover, along with the called “the first bureau” for internal inspection of personnel’s ideas, the ministry itself has an organization to observe and control all the officials inside. With the foreign minister as the chairperson, the so-called “first party committee” is responsible for officials’ every action and ideological integrity.²⁵

V. Conclusion

We now have a discernible picture of North Korea’s foreign policy-making process. First, organizations involved in North Korea’s foreign policy are examined to show that the ministry of foreign affairs is the most powerful institution, but its autonomy is highly

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.31-34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.30-31.

constrained. Here the role of the department of organization and direction is critical; the head of the department is Kim Jong Il himself and its far-reaching branches supervise and direct every meaningful political activity carried out in North Korea.

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The foreign policy-making process reflects the degree of dictatorship in North Korea. As long as the firm dictatorship in North Korea continues, provocative and rigid behaviors in the international arena will continue. And yet, there is an advantage to a dictatorship of this kind. If Kim Jong Il is eager to bring North Korea out of its economic hardship, the reform process will be accelerated and, in that case, abrupt and swift change in North Korea's foreign policy is possible as we witnessed in June 2000 when Kim Jong Il and his South Korean counterpart Kim Dae Jung embraced each other at the Soonan airport near Pyongyang. In either case, however, we cannot anticipate a progressive and flexible North Korean on the international stage, other than Kim Jong Il himself.

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