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Myanmar and North Korea: Birds of a feather on different paths?

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Synopsis

Myanmar and North Korea, after decades of isolation, have embarked on divergent paths following recent leadership changes. Will North Korea follow Myanmar's return to the international community?

Commentary

Myanmar and North Korea have been East Asia's pariah states for much of the past decade. Both underwent recent leadership changes and appear to be pursuing different paths on the international stage. The military junta which ruled Myanmar for the past twenty years transferred to a nominally civilian government led by President Thein Sein, its former Prime Minister. In North Korea, Kim Jong-Un was propelled into leadership by the death of his father, Kim Jong-Il. Whereas the Thein Sein administration has undertaken political and economic reforms, Kim Jong-Un has only hinted at potential change. Is it wise to tie these hints of North Korean change to hopes that it may follow Myanmar's reformist lead?

Similarities and Differences

Myanmar and North Korea share certain similarities besides pariah status. The military remains the dominant political institution in both states. Both countries have been ruled by eccentric, isolationist authoritarian regimes for much of their post-independence histories. Disastrous economic policies have prevented these two resource-rich countries from achieving their economic potential. Myanmar and North Korea now have the lowest incomes in the region and are ranked 21st and 22nd respectively on the Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy's 2012 Failed States Index. Both countries have poor human security records. There are also concerns of both states' nuclear weapons programmes and ambitions.

Certain differences exist too: Myanmar has more interactions with the global community in the form of (limited) tourism, trade, (controlled) foreign media and literature exposure, and overseas Burmese communities. North Korea jealously guards its isolation and the state has been mostly successful in controlling information flows to the public, though this is changing due to the growing porousness of the Sino-North Korean border. Myanmar's ASEAN membership has helped prevent complete diplomatic isolation, but North Korea has no similar multilateral ties.

Can North Korea follow?

Myanmar is undertaking a precarious course of both political and economic reforms in the face of a flare-up of civil war and communal unrest. For North Korea, the reforms will likely be economic, not political. Myanmar is also open to outside help and technical input, while North Korea appears unreceptive, still singing the hymn of self-sufficiency.

Some observers claim the Thein Sein administration is plagued by a reformist-hardliner split. Hardliners, either profiting from crony capitalism or against the erosion of military dominance, have reportedly stymied Thein Sein's reforms. In North Korea, Kim Jong-Un will face similar setbacks should he embark on reforms which threaten the privileges of his father's loyal apparatchiks.

Another obstacle is North Korea's behemoth military, beneficiary and upholder of the Songun (military first) tradition. Similar to the Burmese Tatmadaw, the Korean People's Army receives the lion's share of the national budget and has influenced (if not outright dictated) government policy in other arenas. The military has much to lose in the event of reform, and will likely try its utmost to preserve its socio-political dominance. Myanmar, meanwhile is slowly trimming its military budget and the new commander-in-chief has both supported reforms and defended the military's political role.

North Korea, like all communist countries, is heavily centralised. It also lacks civil society, opposition parties and popular intellectual exchanges with the outside world, and main decision-making is entrusted to (and entrenched within) the upper echelons of leadership. Hence, the impetus and approval for change must come from the youthful leader himself.

Will North Korea follow?

Even from the perspective of regime security or anchoring Kim Jong-Un's legacy, there remain many reasons for North Korea to pursue reforms. Improving North Korea's economic and agricultural productivity will arguably help stabilise the regime and consolidate public loyalty to the new leader. From a defence perspective, North Korea will need to improve its economic posture in order to retain its footing against South Korea.

China, neighbour to both reclusive states, will likely push for North Korean economic reform, with the view that it will decrease the likelihood of regime implosion and prevent a potential refugee crisis. As with Myanmar, China stands to benefit from an economically sound and politically stable North Korea, especially from investments and natural resource extraction.

Myanmar has begun courting Western investment and recently, President Barack Obama paved the way for US companies to (conditionally) invest in Myanmar. China is Myanmar's biggest investor, but Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore and India also contribute. Unless North Korea's nuclear programme issue is resolved, its only sources of major investment, should reforms make conditions more favourable, will remain China and to a certain extent, Russia.

Looking Ahead

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak recently urged North Korea to follow in Myanmar's footsteps. Despite their similarities, the differences between Myanmar and North Korea remain stark, the key divergence being North Korea's persistent maintenance of its status quo. Myanmar has demonstrated flexibility in realising that its long-term interests will be better served by adopting a more open policy. However, North Korea does not appear to have reached that tipping point just yet – or perhaps its leader has, but the rest of the Politburo is slow to follow.

Recent weeks have shown signs of growing North Korean openness under the young Kim's leadership. Socio-culturally, he has worked on cultivating a 'fatherly' image by reaching out to youth and showing a symbolic readiness to embrace elements of foreign culture by allowing certain Western influences, as demonstrated by a highly publicised Disney-inspired show. Politically, his official titling of "Marshal" and his unexpected dismissal of a top military leader has prompted speculation of a potential purge of his father's cabinet allies and replacing them with his own. On the foreign policy front, North Korea has publicly cited its willingness to return to denuclearisation talks.

There also is an exciting economic impetus for reform: North Korea sits on as much as 20 million tonnes of rare earth minerals. If North Korea were to harness its mineral potential, the US, Japan and South Korea would certainly express interest. Is it prudent to peg these developments as clear and definite indicators of top-down reforms? Ultimately, as we know very little about its inner workings and decision-making processes, it is

perhaps best to tread with informed caution and keep an open mind about North Korea's prospects for opening up the way Myanmar has.

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