Can North Korea Catch Two Rabbits at Once: Nuke and Economy?  
One Year of the Byungjin Line in North Korea and Its Future

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North Korea claims the Byungjin Line is indeed the “treasured sword” with which it can achieve both economic development and defense reinforcement to speed up the construction of a strong and prosperous socialist nation. Aiming at evaluating its prospects, this study seeks to capture the main features, goals and tasks of the Byungjin Line envisioned by the Kim regime and then assess if its empirical records over the first year of Byungjin go in the right direction as planned. While the Byungjin Line pays more attention to the civilian economy unlike the North’s preceding policies, it has made only marginal progress short of innovation in its economy but strengthened the national defense industry reinforcing its conventional warfare capacity as well as nuclear arsenal. Without making any dramatic changes, the Byungjin Line is unsustainable in the long term, deepening international sanctions and prolonging the country’s economic isolation. South Korea should follow policies encouraging North Korea prioritize economy in its own policy, reducing the North’s economic dependence on China, and adopt a pragmatic approach to the North’s nuclear ambitions.

Key words: North Korea, Byungjin Line, defense, nuclear program, North Korean economy

Introduction

A year has passed since North Korea officially adopted its so-called “Byungjin Line,” centered on the two pillars of economic development and nuclear program, at the Central Party Committee’s Plenary Session on March 31, 2013. The Plenary Session introduced the Byungjin Line as “the most revolutionary and popular” policy line for national success, involving the strengthening of both its nuclear arsenal, to be used for national defense, and economic development with the goal of creating “a strong and prosperous nation.” The New Year’s Address, read by Kim Jong Un himself, in January 2014, declared the year of 2013 as “the year in which North Koreans triumphed in their two-pronged battle to build a strong nation and guard socialism, with the help of the Byungjin Line.” As these declarations indicate, the nuclear program stands at

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the center of the Kim regime’s economic and defense development strategy, which effectively aims to make North Korea not only socialist but also strong and prosperous.

In her address to the U.S. Congress in May 2013, however, President Park Geun-hye of South Korea dismissed the sustainability of North Korea’s Byungjin Line, emphasizing, “You cannot have your cake and eat it too.” Any meaningful economic growth in North Korea will be possible only with the cooperation and support of the international community. North Korea’s insistence on a nuclear program, however, will only serve to further alienate the nation from the international community, leading to the continuation of the already severe economic sanctions. The international community agrees with Park on North Korea’s Byungjin Line. There is a significant gap between North Korea’s confidence in its strategy and the international assessment of that strategy.

This study begins by questioning whether the Byungjin Line is indeed an effective strategy to create “a strong and prosperous nation,” as the Kim regime claims. This is a familiar question that appears again and again in the great number of studies that have been published to date dealing with the Byungjin Line. However, the majority of these studies derive their conclusions from deductive thinking and speculation. This study, by contrast, assesses the empirical records related to the Byungjin Line in North Korea over the past year, and makes an inductive attempt at predicting its future.

To this end, this study first seeks to capture main features of the Byungjin Line, as envisioned by the Kim regime, and identifies the tasks that must be fulfilled in order for the strategy to succeed. This study then analyzes the policies that North Korea has enacted, and other actions that it has taken, since it officially adopted the Byungjin Line, and attempts to determine, based on that analysis, whether the Byungjin Line has led to the progress that the Kim regime expects.

On the basis of the foregoing, this study attempts to determine, at least provisionally, whether the Byungjin Line is indeed the “treasured sword” with which North Korea can achieve both economic development and defense reinforcement, or whether it will lead them on a self-destructive path of popular delusion and self-contradiction. This study will wrap up its conclusion with suggestions for proper responses and steps that the South Korean government should take toward the North.

**Main Features and Tasks of the Byungjin Line**

**Main Features**

Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s Address to the public in 2013 suggested that the ideal of the “strong and prosperous nation” that North Korea aspired to become required a focus on economic development.\(^1\) Approximately one month later, on February 12, 2013, the Kim regime proceeded to launch its third nuclear test. The Central Party Committee’s Plenary Session, on March 31, 2013, officially adopted the Byungjin Line, aiming to pursue “economic development and nuclear program simultaneously.” According to the Kim regime, the Byungjin Line is a strategy that “reinforces and expands North Korea’s nuclear arsenal against the constant threat of nuclear attack and invasion, while also empowering the country’s efforts toward economic development.”\(^2\) Stressing that the Byungjin Line is not a one-time pill, but “a strategic path that