NORTH KOREA'S CYBERPATH

Yoo Hyang Kim

The information technology (IT) sector in North Korea has not developed as much as many first expected. Fears held by the current leadership essentially have obstructed development of the country's IT industry. The absence of cyber openness for IT development is a result of the leadership's political consideration of the negative impacts such openness would have on regime stability. This article explores the extent to which the information technology sector in North Korea has developed and why its development has not been so successful. It argues that a variety of cyberpaths for developing North Korea's IT sector do exist. Comparing North Korea with other developing or socialist countries, including India and China, this article asserts that in order to develop an IT industry, North Korea should more closely consider the political dimensions alongside industrial development.

Key words: North Korea, Kim Jong Il, information technology policy, Internet policy, cyber openness

Introduction

The substance and strategy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK or North Korea) Information Technology (IT) sector has been one of the most talked-about subjects in recent years. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's personal
interest in the IT sector has attracted the widespread attention of academics, journalists, and policymakers in South Korea and abroad. ¹ From all indications, North Korea has a sincere desire to cultivate its IT sector, and this should be regarded as something significant.

However, in spite of numerous reports, our knowledge of how far along the North has come with its IT sector development and the kinds of strategies it is employing is quite imperfect. It is safe to say, however, that North Korea's IT sector development has not moved beyond its incipient stage. What is the extent of its development? Why has it not developed as fast as expected? What is the leadership's strategy toward IT sector development? What obstacles does the North Korean regime face in choosing a cyberpath, that is, a course in which to develop the country's IT sector?

Politics is a decisive factor in developing economies and in understanding the pattern of economic development in socialist countries. North Korea is no exception. Assuming that a variety of cyberpaths exists, this article argues that North Korea can develop an IT industry despite its current economic turmoil and inability to reach an advanced stage of post-industrialism. This is possible if we consider the fact that India, in a less-than-developed stage of industrialization, has successfully cultivated an IT industry even in the absence of capital and manufacturing infrastructure. For North Korea, politics has been the main culprit thwarting development of the country's IT industry. Despite their desire, leaders in the DPRK have not been able to provide the political and social conditions necessary for developing the country's information technology industry as Pyongyang is too apprehensive about the destabilizing effects the opening of

¹. An alleged Internet aficionado and web surfer, Kim's visit to China's Sunqiao Modern Development Zone in May 2000 and IT related facilities in Shanghai's Pudong district in January 2001 sparked much attention. His public impressions—"Shanghai, observed by the world in awe, is now going through earth-shattering changes"—and direct request for U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's email address during her visit to Pyongyang in 2000 have led many observers to believe that the North Korean leader has a penchant for all things IT. "Our Great Leader has made an unofficial visit of the People's Republic of China," Rodong Shinmun (Pyongyang), January 21, 2001.