

**Author name:** Joe Pateman  
**Department:** School of Politics and International Relations  
**Journal:** Politics, Religion, & Ideology  
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## **Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and Marxism-Leninism**

### **Abstract**

In the mid 1970s, the North Korean regime stopped presenting its governing ideology as the creative application of Marxism-Leninism. Since Kim Jong-Un took office, the Workers' Party of Korea has endorsed Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, an ideology based upon the theories of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il. English language Commentators have long emphasized the differences between North Korean and Marxist-Leninist political theory. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has further emphasized these differences. It claims to have established an original political theory. This article challenges that claim. By comparing the two ideologies, it argues that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited several political principles from Marxism-Leninism, including a commitment to working class emancipation and the core principles of socialist construction. Although Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism claims to have introduced original socialist principles, these are not that unique. Even North Korea's distinctive Songun (Military First) politics has inherited a Marxist-Leninist rationale. These political similarities illuminate both ideologies. They also expose some inconvenient truths about Marxism-Leninism.

### **Introduction: From Marxism-Leninism to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism**

In the first two decades after Kim Il-Sung launched the Juche idea in 1955, the North Korean regime portrayed its new governing ideology as the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the country's unique conditions. The concept expressed Kim's belief that North Korea should not slavishly copy the Soviet policies adopted by the Eastern Bloc states.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid 1970s, however, the regime began claiming that Juche was an original ideology, one that transcended the doctrines of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Vladimir Lenin. Kim Jong-Il promoted this narrative by reformulating Juche as Kimilsungism. In his 1976 speech, *On Correctly Understanding the Originality of Kimilsungism*, Kim described Kimilsungism as 'an original idea that cannot be explained within the framework of Marxism-Leninism'. First, Juche's philosophical principle maintained that humans had independence, creativity, and consciousness, which enabled them to master everything and decide everything. According to Kim Jong-Il, this transcended the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism, which denied the existence of essential human attributes. Second, Juche's socio-historical principle maintained that human consciousness drove social change. According to Kim,

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Myers, 'The Watershed that Wasn't: Re-evaluating Kim Il-Sung's "Juche Speech" of 1955', *Acta Koreana* 9:1 (2006), pp. 89-115; Thomas Stock, 'North Korea's Marxism-Leninism: Fraternal Criticisms and the Development of North Korean Ideology in the 1960s', *Journal of Korean Studies* 24: 1 (2019), pp. 127-147.

this transcended the Marxist doctrine of historical materialism, which asserted that the objective material conditions played the decisive role. Third, Juche's leadership method gave the party leader supreme power. They directed the socialist revolution and ensured its success. Kim Jong-Il claimed that Marxism-Leninism lacked such a method. Fourth, Juche maintained that the Marxist-Leninist theory of revolution was outdated and belonged to a previous epoch. Kimilsungism provided an original 'explanation of the theories, strategies and tactics on national liberation, class emancipation and human liberation in our era'. Fifth, Juche proposed that the Marxist-Leninist principles for 'building socialism and communism' were relevant only for the period before the triumph of the socialist revolution, but not afterward, since they 'did not go far beyond the limits of prediction and supposition'. Kimilsungism clarified these principles 'in a new way'.<sup>2</sup>

Highlighting these arguments, English language commentators typically emphasise Juche's nationalist and Confucian elements. Nationalism underlines Juche's emphasis upon self-reliance and the North Korean nation, whilst the Confucian concept of 'filial piety' underlies Juche's leadership method, particularly the notion of loving the leader and treating them as a parental figure.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Stock is one of the few scholars who does not emphasise Juche's departure from Marxism-Leninism. In his view, dialectical materialism already recognised the independence, creativity, and consciousness of human beings;<sup>4</sup> historical materialism already acknowledged the decisive role of human consciousness in history;<sup>5</sup> and Marxism-Leninism already affirmed the importance of leaders in ensuring the success of socialism.<sup>6</sup> Although Juche introduced unique ideas, Stock shows that it was fundamentally a reskinning of Marxist-Leninist materialism, not a new ideology.

Stock does not, however, examine Juche's claim to have established a new theory of revolution and principles of socialist construction. He does not examine the relationship between the political theories of Kimilsungism and Marxism-Leninism from the mid 1970s onwards. This is important to note, because after the Cold War ended, the North Korean regime emphasized these political differences more than anything else, whilst also widening them.

In 1989, when Eastern Bloc Marxism-Leninism began to crumble, Kim Jong-Il declared that North Korea survived because of 'socialism of our style', which embodied 'the Juche idea'. In his view, the Eastern European socialist regimes were collapsing because they copied the soviet political model mechanically, thereby ignoring their own national conditions. They failed to understand that the soviet experience was based on

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<sup>2</sup> Kim Jong-Il, *On Understanding the Originality of Kimilsungism* (Korean Friendship Association, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Armstrong, 'Familism, Socialism and Political Religion in North Korea', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6:3 (2005), pp. 383-84, 389-90; Alzo David-West, 'Between Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism: Juche and the Case of Chŏng Tasan', *Korean Studies* 35 (2011), pp. 93-121; Sergei Kurbanov, 'North Korea's Juche Ideology: Indigenous Communism or Traditional Thought?', *Critical Asian Studies*, 51: 2 (2019), pp. 296-305.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Stock, 'Beyond the Myth of Idealism: North Korea's Marxist-Leninist Materialism and its Place in the Global History of the Cold War', *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 33:1 (2020), pp. 223-225.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235. See also Klaus-Georg Riegel, 'Marxism-Leninism as a Political Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1 (2005), pp. 97-126.

specific historical and social circumstances that were unrepeatable elsewhere. Korean style socialism succeeded because it repudiated the soviet model.<sup>7</sup> After the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1992, North Korea's socialist constitution erased all references to Marxism-Leninism.

Following Kim Il-Sung's death in 1994, Kim Jong-Il proclaimed 'Songun' (Military First) politics as a new governing principle, effectively legitimizing the rise to prominence of the Korean People's Army. Songun claimed to prioritize the army over the working class, thereby rejecting the Marxist-Leninist principle of proletarian leadership.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have argued that this ideological departure was particularly significant. According to Charles Armstrong, Songun removed 'any remaining pretence of North Korea's adherence to Marxian class struggle',<sup>9</sup> Ilpyong Kim describes Songun as 'a complete rejection of the classic Marxist theory of the proletarian dictatorship',<sup>10</sup> whilst Paul French argues that Songun represented 'a fundamental reworking of classic Marxist-Leninist thinking'.<sup>11</sup>

In 2009, North Korea's constitution deleted references to 'communism', the end goal of Marxism-Leninism. '[S]ocialism was retained, but any indication of its foreign origin was erased. The DPRK was officially a socialist state that operated according to its own internal ideologies'.<sup>12</sup>

Following Kim Jong-Il's death in 2011, his son and successor 'Marshall' Kim Jong-Un 'combin[ed] the President's [Kim Il-Sung] ideology with the General's [Kim Jong-Il], calling them Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and recognizing it as the guiding ideology' of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea.<sup>13</sup> By codifying the theories of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il into one umbrella ideology, Kim Jong-Un did for his father and grandfather what Stalin did for Marx, Engels and Lenin: he established a systematized, unified interpretation of their ideas.

Unlike his forebears, however, Kim Jong-Un has felt no need to even mention Marxism-Leninism, let alone situate Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism in relation to it. Whereas previous Kims recommended the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, the Marshall recommends 'the immortal works of the President and the General and the documents of the Party', which alone constitute 'a library of Kimilsungism-

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<sup>7</sup> Kim Jong-Il, *Selected Works*, vol. 10 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1990), pp. 431-68.

<sup>8</sup> Kim Jong-Il, *The Songun-Based Revolutionary Line is a Great Revolutionary Line of our Era and an Ever-Victorious Banner of our Revolution* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Charles Armstrong, 'The Role and Influence of Ideology', in Kyung-Ae Park & Scott Snyder (eds.), *North Korea in Transition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Kim Ilpyong, 'Kim Jong Il's Military-First Politics', in Young Whan Kihl & Hong Nack Kim (eds.) *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 70.

<sup>11</sup> Paul French, *North Korea: State of Paranoia* (London: Zed Books, 2015), p. 322.

<sup>12</sup> Darren Zook, 'Reforming North Korea: Law, Politics, and the Market Economy', *Stanford Journal of International Law* 48:1 (2012), p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Let us Brilliantly Accomplish the Revolutionary Cause of Juche, Holding Kim Jong-Il in High Esteem as the Eternal General Secretary of our Party* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2012), pp. 5, 6.

Kimjongilism'.<sup>14</sup> The regime has supported this line. In 2012, the portraits of Marx and Lenin adorning Kim Il-Sung Square in Pyongyang were replaced with a portrait of the President. References to Marxism-Leninism in North Korean discourse have reduced in number.

It should be unsurprising, given these developments, that the 'English-language scholarship, for the most part, regards the history of North Korean ideology as a continued movement away from Marxism-Leninism toward a more indigenous philosophy in correspondence with Korea's historical legacy'.<sup>15</sup> Although Stock has established that Juche's philosophical, socio-historical, and leadership principles remain rooted in Marxism-Leninism, English language commentators have long emphasized the differences between their respective political theories. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has further emphasized these differences. It claims to have established an original political theory.

North Korea's attempt to divorce its political theory from Marxism-Leninism matters, because many now view Marxism-Leninism as a relic of a bygone era, a dogmatic creed that lost all legitimacy and relevance with the demise of soviet socialism. Non-ruling Marxist-Leninist parties are not as popular as they were prior to the soviet collapse. Although China, Cuba, Vietnam, and Laos still pledge allegiance to the doctrine, commentators have questioned their ideological commitment. Kim Jong-Un's government is aware of the negative stigma surrounding Marxism-Leninism. By claiming to have discarded that maligned ideology, the regime can present North Korea as a modern, prosperous, strong and successful socialist nation, one that will not collapse.

This article challenges that claim. By comparing the two ideologies, it argues that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited several fundamental political principles from Marxism-Leninism, including a commitment to working class emancipation and the core principles of socialist construction. Although Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism claims to have introduced original socialist principles, these are not that unique. Even North Korea's distinctive 'Songun' (Military First) politics has a Marxist-Leninist rationale.

This article's argument has several implications. One of them is that it is misleading to over-emphasize Juche's nationalist and Confucian elements. Although these elements have certainly grown over time, it is important to acknowledge the Marxist-Leninist rationale underlying Juche's development, from its inception till today. Juche has developed not with the purpose of rejecting Marxism-Leninism, but with the purpose of defending the political fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. By overlooking this aspect, scholars may provide an unbalanced picture of the beliefs and thought processes guiding the North Korean leadership. They may also underestimate the similarities between Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and Marxism-Leninism, not only with regards to their political theories, but also their political systems and policies.

A second implication, which leads directly from the first, is that North Korea is not impervious to the political principles that helped bring down the Soviet Union. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited several of these principles. North Korea's political system is not as modern or as strong as it claims to be.

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<sup>14</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Let Us Hasten Final Victory Through a Revolutionary Ideological Offensive* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Stock, 'Myth of Idealism', p. 216. According to Kurbanov, 'South Korean researchers...regard *juche* as a North Korean interpretation of communism, socialism, or both'. See Kurbanov, '*Juche* Ideology', p. 297.

A third implication is that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism exposes some inconvenient truths about Marxism-Leninism, truths that adherents of the latter want to keep hidden. These three implications will be examined more thoroughly in the conclusion.

With regards to sources on Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, this article focuses upon official English-language publications released since the ideology's inception in 2011.<sup>16</sup> Although these have received less scholarly interest than older works, they give the most accurate picture of what political principles the DPRK endorses today. Three sources stand out in this regard; and will receive special attention here. One of them is the five-part series, *Exposition of the Principles of the Juche Idea*, published in 2014 by the WPK-controlled Foreign Languages Publishing House, which translates the key government and leader documents. This series constitutes the most recent and comprehensive official exposition of Juche since 2011.<sup>17</sup>

A second DPRK source used in this article is the *Fundamentals of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, published in 2016 by the Korean Association of Social Scientists, another prominent ideological mouthpiece.<sup>18</sup> This is the first text to combine all the principles of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism into one volume. In this sense, the *Fundamentals* functions as North Korea's version of the soviet *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*, which served as an official textbook for the doctrine during the Cold War.

Thirdly, this article examines the pronouncements of Kim Jong-Un himself. In North Korea, the leader's views have always been the most influential in shaping the official ideology. An examination of Kim Jong-Un's speeches and writings should therefore give an accurate insight into Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, his brainchild.

As for Marxism-Leninism, this ideology has been interpreted differently across time and space. This article focuses upon the fundamental political principles of the doctrine, which have been adopted by all its adherents. Besides referencing the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, this analysis utilizes two additional sources: the *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*,<sup>19</sup> and the *Dictionary of Scientific Communism*.<sup>20</sup> These were published in the Soviet Union, the leading authority on Marxism-Leninism during the Cold War.

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<sup>16</sup> The English-language translations may not convey the full meaning of the Korean language. Those proficient in Korean may benefit from comparing the sources cited in this article to the Korean language originals.

<sup>17</sup> Kim Song Gwon, *Exposition of the Principles of Juche Idea — 1: What is the View of the Juche Idea on the World* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014); O Song Chol, *Exposition of the Principles of Juche Idea — 2: The Torch of Juche that Illuminates Human Society* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014); Son Hyon Suk and Kim Chang Gyong, *Exposition of the Principles of Juche Idea — 3: Fundamentals of Rise and Fall of Country and Nation* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014); Kim Chang Gyong, *Exposition of the Principles of Juche Idea — 4: Songun Opens the Door of Independence and Prosperity* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014); Ri Jong Hwa, *Exposition of the Principles of Juche Idea — 5: The Building of a Thriving Socialist Country* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> *Fundamentals of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* (Korean Association of Social Scientists, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Otto Kuusinen (Ed.) *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> *A Dictionary of Scientific Communism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984).

As for this article's structure, the first section argues that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of working-class emancipation. The second section argues that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited several Marxist-Leninist principles of socialist construction. The third section challenges North Korea's claim to have established several original principles of socialist construction, including Songun, under the slogan of 'socialism of our style'. It shows that even these principles possess a Marxist-Leninist basis. Finally, the conclusion outlines some implications of this analysis, some of its weaknesses, and suggestions for future studies on the topic.

### **Working class emancipation**

In the political theory of Marxism-Leninism, the concept of social class is a fundamental unit of analysis. Since the rise of the state and slavery, Marxism-Leninism maintains that societies have been divided into two main classes: an exploiting property-owning class, which holds political power, and an exploited propertyless class, that lacks political power. These two classes are in perpetual conflict, since they have antagonistic interests. The exploiting class wants to retain its political power and status as the ruling class, whilst the exploited class wants to obtain political power and become the ruling class. As such, the history of society is the history of class struggle.<sup>21</sup>

As an ideology that arose under capitalism, Marxism-Leninism identifies the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as the primary class antagonism. According to Marxism, the working class will seize state power from the bourgeoisie, via a proletarian revolution, and in doing so establish its political domination. Having done that, the workers' state will abolish private property, establish a socialist system of socially owned property, and in so doing emancipate the other laboring groups. For that reason, Marxism-Leninism speaks of liberating the 'working people', the 'masses', and the 'people', terms it uses more or less interchangeably.<sup>22</sup> As a political ideology, Marxism-Leninism describes itself as the revolutionary theory of the working class.

Marxism-Leninism also claims to be a scientific working-class theory. It defends this claim by presenting the class struggle as an inherent feature of exploiting societies; and as an objective phenomenon driving social change, from slavery, through to feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. As such, Marxism-Leninism views socialism as the inevitable result of an objective historical process. Socialism will be shaped by the vicissitudes of the class struggle, not some abstract theoretical blueprint. It is this scientific conviction that, according to Marxism-Leninism, sets it apart from the other varieties of socialism, most notably 'utopian socialism', which constructs ideal visions of the perfect socialist society divorced from the class struggle.<sup>23</sup>

Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism inherits the same class analysis, class mission, and scientific conviction. Firstly, like Marxism-Leninism, it views social class as a basic component of political analysis. This is established in the *Fundamentals of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, which states that the 'character of society is determined by which class...seizes political power'.<sup>24</sup> An 'exploiter society', it explains 'is the reactionary society in which the exploiter class seizes state power and the means of production and exploits the working masses'. Like Marxism-Leninism, Kimilsungism-

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<sup>21</sup> *Fundamentals*, pp. 183-215.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 362-366.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-22.

<sup>24</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, p. 36.

Kimjongilism maintains that the ‘slave owning society, feudal society and capitalist society are exploiter societies’.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, ‘the masses’ struggle to advance history and shape their destiny is the process of acute confrontation with the reactionary ruling class’.<sup>26</sup> Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism rejects any analysis of society that eschews the centrality of class. The textbook *What is the Juche Idea of the World* makes this clear when it says that ‘in class society...there is no supra class “interest”’. Any view that presents itself as being ‘apart from class interests’ is a ‘mere signboard to restore capitalism against the interest of the socialist working masses’.<sup>27</sup> It is evident, therefore, that the political theory of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is rooted in a Marxist-Leninist class analysis. The concepts of class and the class struggle are central to the ideology’s image, language, and political perspective.

Secondly, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism inherits the Marxist-Leninist view that the working class is the force that will undertake a revolution and create socialism. It even credits Marxism-Leninism with making this discovery. According to *The Torch of Juche That Illuminates Human Society*, ‘Marx and Engels, the first leaders of the working class in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century’, discovered ‘the historical mission and road of liberation of the working class that emerged for the first time in the historical arena and encouraged them to struggle against capital’. When capitalism became imperialism during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lenin developed Marxism under the new conditions and established Leninism. In doing so, he encouraged the workers to struggle for their freedom ‘against imperialism, opening the vista for transitioning from capitalism to socialism’.<sup>28</sup> Juche presents Marxism-Leninism as a turning point in working class history. When it arose, ‘the exploited working masses...were awakened that the way for happiness free from exploitation and oppression is to fight against capital’.<sup>29</sup> From Marxism-Leninism, Juche inherits the idea that:

The emergence of the progressive working class is an important condition for the popular masses to evolve into an independent driving force of history...its demand is to live an independent and creative life free from all sorts of subordination and restrictions and its historic mission is to provide complete independence for not only workers but all members of society, the popular masses.<sup>30</sup>

Thirdly, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited the scientific conviction of Marxism-Leninism. According to *The Building of a Thriving Socialist Country*, ‘the outlines of the ideal society were depicted in the “Utopia” of Thomas Moore and the “City of the Sun” by Campanella. They simply wrote of the desire and the ideals of people, failing to give the practical possibility and the scientific way of realizing their desire’. More and Campanella were proponents of ‘Utopian Socialism’.<sup>31</sup> Like Marxism-Leninism, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism maintains that socialism is not an arbitrary goal. Socialism is the product of historical necessity. It is inscribed upon the historical process. Since the subjugated masses strive to overcome all barriers in the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Kim, *Juche Idea— 1*, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> O, *Juche Idea — 2*, p. 51.

<sup>29</sup> Kim, *Juche Idea — 1*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>30</sup> *Juche Idea: Answers to Hundred Questions* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2012), p. 26; see also *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Ri, *Juche Idea — 5*, pp. 1-2.

development of their independence, creativity and consciousness, it is an objective law that they will inevitably construct a socialist society, the only society that can realize these attributes. Even the fall of soviet Marxism-Leninism has not shaken Juche's conviction that the victory of socialism is inevitable. For as Kim Jong-Un argues, 'it is a law of historical development that mankind advanced towards socialism... socialism, with its scientific accuracy and veracity, is endowed with eternal validity'.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the *Fundamentals of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism* proclaims that 'the masses' will to realize socialism cannot be broken and reflects the independent aspiration of social beings and the lawful demand of the development of history'.<sup>33</sup> This scientific conviction is rooted in Marxism-Leninism.

According to Juche, however, Marxism-Leninism failed to realize the complete liberation of the working masses.<sup>34</sup> The reason for this is that it reflected the proletarian struggle's requirements during the immediate aftermath of the socialist revolution. It arose during a time when imperialists dominated the globe and fought each other over colonial lands. The emergence of the Soviet Union, history's first workers' state, signified a historical turning point. But imperialism still subjugated millions throughout the world, in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These continents remained mostly colonized. Juche emerged during a new era, one that Marxism-Leninism lacked answers for. In this era, the oppressed masses became the masters of their destinies. In the colonies and semi-colonies they struggled against their colonial oppressors in a fight for independence. In their attempts to prevent this, the imperialists intensified their oppression of the people. In order to win their struggles, the proletarian leaders in each country had to solve their problems in accordance with their own situation. In Korea, this was particularly important because of the peculiarities of its historical development, as well as the complexity and arduousness of its revolution. The Korean masses fought not only for national liberation against imperialism; they had to also wage an anti-feudal, democratic revolution simultaneously. The success of the Korean revolution demanded that the masses conduct their activities independently and creatively. Some revolutionaries succumbed to 'flunkeyism', by rejecting the necessity of carrying out the revolution on their own initiative, and by depending on foreign forces. Others succumbed to 'dogmatism', by appealing to the Comintern, and tried to copy the theories and experiences of others, without considering the specific conditions in Korea, which was still a colonial and semi-feudal society. By rejecting this flunkeyism and dogmatism, Kim Il-Sung developed the workers' struggle for independence onto a higher plane. He was well versed in the existing working-class theories, but he did not confine himself to applying them to the Korean revolution. He instead created a new doctrine, the Juche idea, and resolved the era's new problems from an original standpoint.<sup>35</sup> According to the *Fundamentals of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, Kim Il-Sung's theory of working-class emancipation was subsequently developed by Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-Un. These revolutionary leaders also mastered 'the preceding theories of the working class', and on their basis, 'created and further developed Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Report to the Seventh Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea on the Work of the Central Committee* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2016), pp. 13, 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, pp. 96, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Kim, *Juche Idea — 1*, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> O, *Juche Idea — 2*, pp. 55-58, 60-61; *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>36</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, p. 17.

When North Korean ideology therefore claims to have replaced Marxism-Leninism, it does not claim to have discarded its revolutionary working-class essence. It claims to inherit and uphold this essence, whilst protecting it from ‘revisionists’ who seek to abandon it. That is why Kim Jong-Un said that ‘Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is a fundamental guarantee for making the working-class revolutionary’.<sup>37</sup> That is the principal aim of the theory. In fact, one of North Korea’s major criticisms of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc is that they failed to maintain this revolutionary working class stand. By crushing the workers with bureaucracy, and by failing to revolutionize the workers politically, economically, and ideologically, ‘they treated Marxism dogmatically and even negated its revolutionary essence, following revisionist policies’.<sup>38</sup> This is a significant remark. In North Korea’s view, the extinct socialist states failed to emancipate the working class not because they adhered to Marxism-Leninism, but because they abandoned Marxism-Leninism. By claiming to uphold the mission of working-class revolution, North Korea is essentially claiming to be more Marxist than the regimes describing themselves as such. By calling its ideology Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism rather than Marxism-Leninism, the regime can distance itself from the revisionist regimes that have, in its view, betrayed the working class and the revolutionary essence of Marxism. This is what Kim Jong-Un means when he says that Juche developed during a ‘serious political and class struggle against...revisionism’.<sup>39</sup> Juche’s aim, in opposing revisionism, is to ‘defend the working-class purity’ of the liberation struggle, and to ‘leave no room’ in the workers’ minds ‘for even the smallest non-working-class element to infiltrate’.<sup>40</sup>

### **North Korea’s Marxist-Leninist principles of socialist construction**

Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism recognizes that Marx, Engels, and Lenin made important contributions to the principles of socialist construction. Without their ideological discoveries, the communist movement would never have experienced success. ‘Marx and Engels opened the vista for the international communist movement and Lenin made the transition from capitalism to socialism possible’.<sup>41</sup> The suggestion here is that North Korean socialism would not have arisen if it were not for Marxism-Leninism. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism consciously builds upon the legacy of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. It has inherited the principles of socialism in one country, socialist democracy, democratic centralism, economic planning, and the construction of communism. This section examines each of these principles in turn.

Stalin’s doctrine of socialism in one country is the political foundation of Marxism-Leninism. It affirms the possibility of building socialism within a single state, without relying on a world-wide socialist revolution. Socialism, on the Marxist-Leninist view,

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<sup>37</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *On the Duties of the Working Class of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il for the Times and the Tasks Facing Trade Union Organizations*. (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2016), pp. 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Ri, *Juche Idea* — 5, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *The Cause of the Workers’ Party of Korea is Ever-Victorious* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2020), p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Let Trade Unions Become Vanguard Organizations in Opening up an Era of Fresh Upsurge in Socialist Construction* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2021), p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> O, *Juche Idea* — 2, pp. 58-57; See also Son and Kim, *Juche Idea* — 3, p. 58.

is society featuring social ownership of the means of production.<sup>42</sup> In practice, this has meant state ownership. The more a country can build socialism by itself, the more it adheres to the policy of socialism in one country. After Stalin's death, Enver Hoxha's Albania was perhaps the most committed exponent of this principle. Albania demonstrated its commitment to anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism by maintaining a self-reliant, isolationist stance and a high degree of state ownership throughout its existence.

North Korea is comparable to Albania. Besides retaining a high degree of state ownership, it has also promoted autarky. Juche's 'guiding principles' are political independence, economic self-sufficiency, and self-reliance in defense.<sup>43</sup> By elevating these principles to the level of theoretical dogma, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism not only champions the treasured Stalinist principle of socialism in one country. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has also taken this principle to its ultimate and most logical conclusion. It showcases the purity of the 'Hermit Kingdom's' Marxism-Leninism.

Socialist democracy, according to Marxist-Leninist theory, is a political system in which the masses participate in the daily management of state affairs.<sup>44</sup> It is realized primarily in a hierarchy of representative councils, which the citizens elect from the local to the national level. The Marxist-Leninist states featuring multiple political parties describe themselves as 'people's democracies'. In these systems, a single communist party has always dominated a ruling 'popular front' coalition, in which the other parties are subordinate.

The DPRK identifies 'socialist democracy as the basic mode of its activities'. This is 'a type of politics...under which all members of society hold the position of masters of the state and society'. The North Korean state consists of people's representative organs that 'are elected upon the basis of universal, direct and equal suffrage by secret ballot'.<sup>45</sup> Since North Korea has multiple parties, it has also maintained the title of people's democracy, though the Workers' Party of Korea dominates the governing coalition. North Korean socialist democracy differs little from the Marxist-Leninist interpretation. The Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's unicameral legislature, performs the same rubber stamp function as the Supreme Soviet in the Soviet Union. The Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland, North Korea's popular front, functions identically to the popular fronts in the Marxist-Leninist people's democracies. The comparisons of similarly named institutions could go on. Fundamentally, North Korea's socialist democracy has not changed much from the soviet model established in 1948.

Democratic centralism is a Leninist organizational principle combining democracy and centralism. The democratic element describes the electivity of political posts, the accountability of the leading organs to the lower-level ones, and open discussion. Before the leadership formulates a policy, it opens the discussion to everyone, and allows everyone to advance their opinion and influence the outcome. The centralism aspect describes the fact that once the leadership makes its decision, everyone must

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<sup>42</sup> *Scientific Communism*, p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, pp. 47-64; Kim Jong-Un, *On Socialist Construction and the Internal and External Policies of the Government of the Republic at the Present Stage* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2019), pp. 3, 10, 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Scientific Communism*, p. 61.

<sup>45</sup> *Understanding Korea Series 3: Politics* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2016), pp. 14, 21, 46-47.

support it.<sup>46</sup> In practice, democratic centralism functions to empower the party leadership.

Article 5 of North Korea's constitution says that '[a]ll the State organs in the DPRK are formed and function on the principle of democratic centralism'.<sup>47</sup> As under Marxism-Leninism, the higher-ranking bodies are nominally accountable to the lower ones, and leaders supposedly make decisions by encouraging the people to discuss policies beforehand, and by selecting the best ideas from them. Kim Jong-Il himself acknowledged that 'Marxism-Leninism expounded the general norms of democratic centralism'.<sup>48</sup> As under Marxism-Leninism, North Korea's democratic centralism has always empowered the leaders.

The Marxist-Leninist principle of centralized economic planning entails state control over key aspects of the economy, including investment, the prices of goods, production output, distribution, and resource allocation, over a long-term period.<sup>49</sup> This principle of socialist construction has seen a range of interpretations in Marxist-Leninist states. Hoxha's Albania endorsed near total state control of the economy. China, by contrast, gradually reintroduced private enterprise and elements of the free market after Deng Xiaoping took office. Despite this variation, all Marxist-Leninist states have utilized economic plans, which aim to direct national economic development over several years.

Article 34 of the DPRK constitution declares that its 'national economy...is a planned economy'.<sup>50</sup> The regime acknowledges that the degree of planning has reduced over time. During the early years, most enterprises were nationalized and centrally planned. In recent decades the private sector has grown.<sup>51</sup> In 2013, Kim Jong-Un introduced the policy of 'Byungjin', which aims to raise the people's living standards and develop civilian technology, particularly IT and computer controlled manufacturing, alongside the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.<sup>52</sup> Under Byungjin a more varied consumer market has emerged, state firms have branched out into private sector operations, and the regime has been more willing to engage in joint ventures that expand special economic zones. Nevertheless, economic plans remain important. In his closing address to the WPK's 8<sup>th</sup> Congress, Kim Jong-Un said that 'the future of our socialist cause hinges on how the tasks set by this Party congress, including the five-year plan for the national economic development, are fulfilled'.<sup>53</sup> North Korea's economic planning is more pervasive than any remaining Marxist-Leninist regime.

The final socialist principle to examine is communism, the end goal of Marxism-Leninism. Marx defined communism as a classless society of material abundance and advanced technological development, lacking a division of labor. During the transition to communism, the state withers away, as the entire community participates in democratic self-governance, rather than a separate body of officials. Communism

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<sup>46</sup> *Scientific Communism*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>47</sup> *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2017), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Kim, *Works*, vol. 10, p. 252.

<sup>49</sup> *Fundamentals*, pp. 703-709.

<sup>50</sup> *Socialist Constitution*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, p. 94.

<sup>52</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Concluding Speech at the March 2013 Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Closing Address at the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea* (Pyongyang, Foreign Languages publishing House, 2021), p. 5.

features Marx's distributive principle 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs'.<sup>54</sup>

At a first glance, it appears that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism rejects the Marxist-Leninist conception of communism. Kim Il-Sung argued that the North Korean state would remain under communism if the worldwide socialist revolution failed to materialize. Kim also said nothing about the party and its leader relinquishing power under communism.<sup>55</sup>

This view, however, is not as heretical as it seems. Despite its rhetoric about a stateless society, Marxism-Leninism is ambivalent as to the fate of the state and party under communism. It emphasizes that communism will not be anarchic, and that society will still require gigantic economic planning and administrative organs that utilize discipline and coercion,<sup>56</sup> which could be described as a state. Stalin, the founder of Marxism-Leninism, 'hint[ed] at the possibility' of a 'communist state'.<sup>57</sup> Like Kim Il-Sung, Stalin argued that Soviet communism would retain a state for as long as the surrounding capitalist countries remained a threat,<sup>58</sup> and it is well established that Stalin heavily influenced the formation of North Korean ideology.<sup>59</sup> Nor is there any explicit mention- at least in the soviet sources explored in this article- of the party relinquishing its leading role under communism. This leaves room for a supreme party leader, who is not ruled out in Marxist-Leninist theory. There is an obvious explanation for why Marxism-Leninism does not address these glaring issues: ruling communist parties have no intention of ever ceding power or abolishing the state, despite their declamations about a future stateless society.

Once these reservations are considered, there are no longer any significant distinctions between the Marxist-Leninist and North Korean conceptions of communism. On this subject, the main difference between the two ideologies is their presentation and language. Although they present the same vision, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism honestly and openly admits that the party, its leader, and the state will remain in force under communism, whereas Marxism-Leninism prefers to hide or omit these facts.

Why then, did North Korea's constitution erase references to communism in 2009? Doesn't this show its rejection of communism? Not necessarily. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, the prospects for communism in one country become stronger as more countries become socialist. After the soviet bloc collapsed, the number of socialist countries fell drastically, and so many abandoned their hopes in communism arriving any time soon. Although the remaining Marxist-Leninist regimes still pay lip-service to communism, it figures as a distant goal. Cuba even dropped its commitment to communism from the first draft of its new constitution in 2018, indicating that few

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<sup>54</sup> *Scientific Communism*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>55</sup> Kim Il-Sung, *Works*, vol. 21 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985), pp. 239-240.

<sup>56</sup> *Fundamentals*, p. 870

<sup>57</sup> Roland Boer, 'After October: Towards a Theory of the Socialist State', *International Critical Thought* 7:3 (2017), pp. 320, 318.

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Works*, vol. 14. (London: Red Star Press, 1978), p. 422.

<sup>59</sup> Seong-Chang Cheong, 'Stalinism and Kimilsungism: A Comparative Analysis of Ideology and Power', *Asian Perspective* 24: 1 (2000), pp. 133-161.

believed in it anymore.<sup>60</sup> This factor might have contributed to North Korea's relegation of the term in 2009. The regime may have seen little value in referencing an ideal that remains fundamentally utopian and out of reach. Nevertheless, North Korea has not abandoned communism. Kim Jong-Un revived the term in 2021, and repeatedly identified it as the country's end goal.<sup>61</sup> The WPK's Bylaws have also retained an explicit commitment to building 'a communist society'.<sup>62</sup>

In a key respect, North Korea is more communist than China, its Marxist-Leninist neighbor. Although China has gotten closer to the goal of material abundance, North Korea's class structure is more working class. Whilst economic inequalities persist, these are smaller than in China, where there are many billionaires and millionaires alongside the working class.

### **'Socialism of our style'**

Although Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism inherited these core Marxist-Leninist principles of socialist construction with little modification, it claims to have replaced several other principles with new ones. The regime emphasizes the originality of these principles when defending its conception of 'socialism of our style'. This section evaluates the extent to which these principles depart from Marxism-Leninism.

Perhaps most significantly, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism rejects the leading role of the working class. As the ideology rightly recognizes, it is a principle, in Marxist-Leninist states, to 'conduct the revolution and construction with the working class as the hard core, the main force'.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to this formula, 'the principle of Songun Revolution includes the principle of prioritizing the army before the working class'.<sup>64</sup> A rationale for Songun is provided in the textbook *Songun Opens the Door of Independence and Prosperity*, in the section 'Army Comes Before the Working Class'. It begins by tracing the principle of working-class leadership back to Marx. Upon examining the conditions in the developed capitalist countries of the mid nineteenth century, 'Marx defined the working class as the main force of the revolution'. It would lead the struggle to abolish capitalism and build socialism. According to Songun, this theory correctly reflected the conditions prevailing in the capitalist societies of that time. It played a positive role in the workers' struggle during that period, as proven by the Paris Commune and the October Socialist Revolution. Over time, however, the conditions changed. Using arguments that will be familiar to those who have followed Western Marxist debates on class during the last thirty years, Songun proposes that the working class' changing composition has transformed its character due to the domination of mental over manual labor, as well as the technological and scientific revolution. 'Reactionary bourgeois ideology and culture' has also become 'rampant'

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<sup>60</sup> 'Cuba Ditches Aim of Building Communism from Draft Constitution', *The Guardian*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/22/cuba-ditches-aim-of-building-communism-from-draft-constitution>

<sup>61</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Closing Speech at the Sixth Conference of Cell Secretaries of the Workers' Party of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2021), pp. 6, 7; Kim, *Trade Unions*, pp. 5, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Young, 'In Kim Jong Un's Speeches, Marx Returns to North Korea', *NK News*, 7 July 7, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/07/in-kim-jong-uns-speeches-marx-returns-to-north-korea/>

<sup>63</sup> Kim, *Juche Idea* — 4, p. 33.

<sup>64</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, p. 73.

under monopoly capitalism, ‘oppressing the consciousness and revolutionization of the working class’. With ‘this being the case, the theory evolved by Marx and Engels one and a half centuries ago is meaningless’. By recognizing the need to develop theory in accordance with reality, Kim Jong-Il identified the Korean People’s Army (KPA) as the leading force of the revolution, thereby elevating its dominance over the working class to a permanent principle.<sup>65</sup>

Songun is another rationalization of the reality in North Korea, which has become a highly militarized society. The KPA is omnipresent. Besides performing traditional defense tasks, it also aids construction projects, agricultural production, and daily administrative functions. The KPA played a critical role in keeping North Korea’s economy afloat during the mid 1990s, when the country suffered a period of famine called the ‘Arduous March’. The huge importance of the KPA in this period made it a new vanguard by necessity.

Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism also claims to offer an original perspective on ideology under socialism. ‘The Soviet Union and East European socialist countries collapsed because of neglecting ideology’, claims a Juche textbook. Quoting Kim Jong-Il, it says that ‘they did not put the main emphasis on strengthening the motive force for building socialism and on enhancing its role; they failed to understand the essence of socialism, on centering on the popular masses, the makers of history’.<sup>66</sup> These countries focused too much on ‘the economy, regarding the objective material conditions as the decisive factor’. As a result, the people lost faith in socialism, and ‘collectivism was replaced with individualism’. By exploiting this ‘ideological background...Gorbachev, the renegade of socialism, began to restore capitalism’, by promoting a “‘new thinking method” and “new road to socialism””. By then, the ‘Soviet people’s ideology was too vague to properly judge the true nature of Gorbachev’. He used this opportunity to accelerate ‘the degeneration of socialist ideology’ in the popular consciousness. As the result of Gorbachev’s efforts, many soviet citizens became attracted to capitalism, distrusted the party and state, opposed socialism, and supported the ‘reactionary elements’ moves of anti-socialism blindly’.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism emphasizes the prime importance of ideological education in sustaining socialism, even prioritizing this above economic development. If the masses are armed with the Juche idea, as well as the principles of collectivism and communitarianism, then they will remain loyal to socialism even if the economy remains underdeveloped, since the masses are the motive force of the revolution.<sup>68</sup>

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korean ideology has openly endorsed nationalism,<sup>69</sup> opposed by Marxism-Leninism on the grounds that it divides and weakens the workers in different countries. Marxism-Leninism combines ‘socialist patriotism’- which encourages citizens to love their socialist homeland- with ‘proletarian internationalism’, which supports workers’ emancipatory struggles across the world.<sup>70</sup> According to Marxism-Leninism, ‘after the complete victory of communism, the all-round convergence of nations will ultimately bring about a gradual disappearance of national distinctions’, and ‘a new form of historical community of people, broader than the [nation] and uniting the whole mankind into one family, will

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<sup>65</sup> Kim, *Juche Idea* — 4, pp. 33-34.

<sup>66</sup> O, *Juche Idea* — 2, pp. 61, 112-113.

<sup>67</sup> Son and Kim, *Juche Idea* — 3, pp. 75-76.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>69</sup> *On Nationalism* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2008).

<sup>70</sup> *Scientific Communism*, pp. 168-70.

arise'.<sup>71</sup> Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism does not envision the end of nations. It thinks that separate nations are here to stay.

Some allege that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism also endorses xenophobic ethno-nationalism, the doctrine that defines the Korean nation by its homogenous racial characteristics, especially its shared bloodline. The implication here is that racial mixing will threaten the nation.<sup>72</sup> Ethno-nationalism is antithetical to Marxism-Leninism, which opposes racial theories of the nation in favor of class-based theories.<sup>73</sup>

North Koreans and commentators alike have overexaggerated the extent to which these principles of socialist construction deviate from Marxism-Leninism. For starters, it is questionable whether Songun politics violates the principle of working-class leadership, despite its claim to do so. Article 11 of the socialist constitution recognizes that the DPRK 'shall conduct all activities under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea',<sup>74</sup> a Leninist organization that self-identifies as 'the party of the working class'.<sup>75</sup> It is important, on this point, to recognize that Songun politics arose not out of abstract theorizing, but as a solution to North Korea's economic crisis in the mid 1990s. During this period, the military stepped in to aid civilians in their work, and this blurred the distinction between soldiers and civilians, to the extent that the army became omnipresent in society and the daily life of North Korean citizens. Whilst the National Defense Commission- the command center of Songun- nominally became more powerful, it never usurped the WPK's political dominance over the state and military. Since Kim Jong-Un took office, several reforms have reasserted the Party's supremacy over the military. During the 7<sup>th</sup> WPK congress, a constitutional amendment disbanded the National Defense Commission.<sup>76</sup> In the revisions to the WPK's Bylaws during the 8<sup>th</sup> WPK Congress, the 'people first' principle replaced the 'military first' principle as the Party's guiding principle under socialism, signaling the relegation of Songun politics.<sup>77</sup> Kim Jong-Un himself has stressed that 'the Party's leadership is the lifeline of the KPA'.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, Article 12 of the constitution proclaims that 'the state shall adhere to the class line' and 'strengthen the dictatorship of people's democracy', whilst Article 10 defines this as a 'worker-peasant alliance led by the working class'.<sup>79</sup> This indicates

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>72</sup> Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism*; Tatiana Gabroussenko, 'Ethnic Nationalism and Internationalism in the North Korean Ethnic Worldview', in Roten Kowner and Walter Demel (eds.) *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 413-436.

<sup>73</sup> *Scientific Communism*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>74</sup> *Socialist Constitution*, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Understanding Workers' Party of Korea* (Pyongyang, Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2016), pp. 1, 2, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Atsuhito Isozaki, 'Characteristics of Kim Jong-Un's Leadership: Analyzing the Tone of Official North Korean Media', *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Affairs* 9:1 (2020), pp. 59-61.

<sup>77</sup> Jaewoo Shin 'The Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea', *One Earth Future*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.oneearthfuture.org/program/open-nuclear-network/publications/8th-congress-workers%E2%80%99-party-korea-2>

<sup>78</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Let us Add Eternal Brilliance to Comrade Kim Jong-Il's Great Idea of and Achievements in the Songun Revolution* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2013), p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> *Socialist Constitution*, p. 5.

that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has upheld the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, a Marxist-Leninist concept expressing the rule of the working class.<sup>80</sup>

Kim Jong-Un has also glorified North Korea’s proletariat, by describing it as a ‘vanguard detachment in the revolution’. In apparent violation of Songun, he said that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism prioritized the task of ‘developing them into an elite force and enhancing their core leadership role in every way possible’. The WPK even ‘conferred the honorable title “heroic working class of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il”’ on North Korea’s working class in recognition of its pivotal role in promoting socialist construction.<sup>81</sup> According to Kim Jong-Un, ‘it is only when the working class...stand in the vanguard...that the original features of our style of socialism can be consolidated’.<sup>82</sup>

Lastly, Songun politics presents itself as a form of working-class politics. It portrays the army not as a distinct class, but as one comprising North Korea’s working class. In a speech celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the KPA’s founding in 2018, Kim Jong-Un thanked North Korea’s working class for placing their sons and daughters ‘at the posts of national defense’.<sup>83</sup> Songun also claims that soldiers militantly uphold the proletariat’s revolutionary class standpoint. This is established in the *Fundamentals of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*: ‘Songun politics cements the socialist class foundation by arming the people with the revolutionary soldier spirit, the highest expression of the class consciousness of the working class’.<sup>84</sup>

Analyzed together, these factors indicate that North Korea does not view Songun as a violation of proletarian hegemony. The aim of putting the military first is not to supplant the rule of the working class, but to maintain it, by defending the revolution against internal and external enemies, and by aiding the construction of socialism. When that is understood, there is no longer a contradiction between Military-First politics and ‘Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, [which] is, in essence, the people-first doctrine’.<sup>85</sup>

Songun’s principles are not alien to Marxism-Leninism. Marx, Engels, and Lenin argued that military force was essential to the success and defense of the proletarian revolution. Engels’ analysis of the 1871 Paris commune is representative:

A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon. If the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois?<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Scientific Communism*, p. 73.

<sup>81</sup> Kim, *On the Duties*, p. 2-5.

<sup>82</sup> Kim, *Trade Unions*, pp. 20-21, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *On the Occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> Founding Anniversary of the Korean People’s Army* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism*, p. 128.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Frederick Engels, ‘On Authority’, in Robert Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader*, second edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), p. 733.

Likewise, ‘Lenin identified the armed forces as the key instrument of power for the “dictatorship of the proletariat”’.<sup>87</sup> In his *State and Revolution*, the text outlining his conception of socialism, Lenin envisioned an armed workers’ militia comprising the entire proletarian population as a permanent pillar of socialism.<sup>88</sup> During the 1917 October Revolution, Lenin urged the nascent proletarian militia to not only enforce the workers’ demands, but also to participate in public administration, including food provision.<sup>89</sup> After the Civil War, in a bid to rebuild the economy, a part of the Red Army was ‘converted into *labor armies* and used in the economic field’.<sup>90</sup> When Stalin took office he transformed the Soviet Union into a garrison state. During the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union spent 20% of its GDP on defense- which is comparable to North Korea’s Figure today (24%)- several Marxist-Leninist states retained a war footing, and the same elites often held leading party and military posts. Whilst Songun may have therefore taken militarization to an unprecedented extreme, this policy is fundamentally a radical variant of Marxism-Leninism, not a violation of it.<sup>91</sup>

As for North Korea’s prioritization of ideological education over economic development, this hardly violates Marxism-Leninism. The countries espousing Marxism-Leninism have always recognized the importance of ideology in keeping socialism alive. Ideological education permeated every sphere of the Soviet Union, which promoted communist morality to try and create a ‘New Soviet man’. Whilst North Korea may accuse Gorbachev of neglecting communist ideological education, Gorbachev was not representative of Marxism-Leninism. Kim Il-Sung accused him of revisionism.<sup>92</sup> Although Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism may well have prioritized ideology to an unprecedented degree, this is another extreme trend in Marxism-Leninism, not a departure.

North Korea’s nationalism should not be overemphasized. Although a nationalist discourse is present, the regime has simultaneously endorsed socialist patriotism in its official ideological discourse. Kim Jong-Un has encouraged his citizens to emulate ‘Kim-Jong Il’s patriotism’, which he describes as ‘the crystallization of socialist patriotism’. By this, he means that citizens should support their country and its program for building socialism as their chief priority.<sup>93</sup> Some may describe this as a form of nationalism, and that is fair enough, but it is important to recognize that Marxist-Leninist states endorsing socialist patriotism have also been accused of endorsing nationalism. Stalin, for instance, rehabilitated Russian nationalism during his rule. Although he claimed to reject nationalism in favor of socialist patriotism, Stalin prioritized the building of socialism in Russia over the development of global

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<sup>87</sup> Andrew Scobell, ‘Making Sense of North Korea: Pyongyang and Comparative Communism’, *Asian Security* 1: 3 (2005), pp. 251

<sup>88</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 25 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p. 477.

<sup>89</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 23 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), pp. 329-30.

<sup>90</sup> Commission of the C.C. of the C.P.S.U (ed.) *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (Moscow: Foreign languages Publishing House, 1951), p. 369.

<sup>91</sup> Scobell, ‘North Korea’, pp. 251-253.

<sup>92</sup> Kim Il-Sung, *Works*, vol. 44 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1999), p. 162.

<sup>93</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *Let us Step up the Building of a Thriving Country by Applying Kim Jong-Il’s Patriotism* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2012), p. 6.

communism.<sup>94</sup> Because of this, one could argue that there are few substantive differences between socialist patriotism and nationalism. Both encourage people to prioritize their country's interests above all else. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism seems to advocate this view by deploying the two terms interchangeably. In doing this, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism may offer a more truthful view of socialist patriotism and nationalism than Marxism-Leninism, which continues to distinguish them with little justification.

The DPRK also continues to endorse proletarian internationalism, by voicing its opposition to US imperialism and its support for global workers' struggles. WPK delegates still attend the International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties, an annual conference in which the world's Marxist-Leninist parties meet to share their experiences and issue joint declarations. North Korea's Foreign Languages Publishing House still prefaces its publications of the leaders' statements with Marx and Engels' famous slogan, 'WORKING PEOPLE OF THE WHOLE WORLD, UNITE'. The essence of this internationalist slogan, taken from the *Communist Manifesto*, is that members of the working classes throughout the world have more in common with each other than workers and employers in the same country, and it encourages them to cooperate to defeat capitalism.

Whilst ethno-nationalist ideas can be found in Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, the doctrine also denounces racial theories in places. A Juche textbook repudiates the 'racist...reactionary theory that claims that national culture, national mentality and national identity are defined by the character of a race and that social inequality is based on the race's heredity'. This theory 'served Hitler fascism and those who follow the policy of race discrimination'.<sup>95</sup> North Korea also has 'a history of preliberation and post-liberation struggle against imperial Japanese fascism'. As such, Alzo David-West describes Juche as a form of 'national-Stalinism', not ethno-nationalism.<sup>96</sup> Whether or not one agrees with this description, the evidence suggests that there is a contradiction, or at least a degree of nuance, in North Korea's discourse on race, one that makes it unhelpful to simply describe Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism as an ethno-nationalist ideology. Whilst this element may be present, North Korea has also inherited elements of proletarian internationalism and anti-racism from Marxism-Leninism.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

There are many myths about North Korea and its ideology under the Kim Jong-Un era. One of them is that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism bears little resemblance to Marxism-Leninism. This myth, despite being promoted by the North Korean government, is philosophically and politically untenable. Stock has shown that Juche's philosophical principle, socio-historical principles, and leadership method, do not depart from Marxist-Leninist materialism.<sup>98</sup> Building upon his analysis, this article has found that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has also inherited several fundamental political principles

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<sup>94</sup> E. A. Rees, 'Stalin and Russian Nationalism', in Geoffrey Hosking and Robert Service (eds.) *Russian Nationalism Past and Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), pp. 77-106.

<sup>95</sup> Kim, *Juche Idea — 1*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>96</sup> Alzo David-West, 'North Korea and the Opinion of Fascism: A Cause of Mistaken Identity', *North Korean Review* 8:1 (2012), p. 105.

<sup>97</sup> Gabroussenko, 'Ethnic Nationalism', pp. 413-414.

<sup>98</sup> Stock, 'Myth of idealism'.

from Marxism-Leninism. It has inherited the doctrine of working-class emancipation, which includes a class analysis of society, a commitment to proletarian revolution, and a scientific conviction in the success of socialism. These views constitute the political basis of Marxism-Leninism. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism has inherited the core Marxist-Leninist principles of socialist construction, including Stalin's doctrine of socialism in one country, the system of socialist democracy, democratic centralism, economic planning, and the construction of communism. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism does advocate some distinctive principles under the heading of 'socialism of our style', most notably Songun politics, pervasive ideological education, nationalism, and ethno-nationalism, but these are not as divergent from Marxism-Leninism as is commonly thought.

It is fitting, in the conclusion of this article, to mention four additional significant pieces of evidence in support of its argument. The first is from Kim Il-Sung. The Eternal President never abandoned Marxism-Leninism. In April 1994, three months before his death, Kim delivered a talk to foreign political officials titled 'Ours is the Socialism of Juche'. In this talk, Kim maintained that 'our party has not approached Marxism-Leninism mechanically, but developed and applied it creatively and carried out the revolution and construction in our own way based on the Juche idea'.<sup>99</sup> Juche's founder went to his grave as a hardline Marxist-Leninist. In 2021, North Korea's Foreign Languages Publishing House republished this talk as a separate pamphlet,<sup>100</sup> which indicates that the regime still endorses it.

The second piece of evidence is from Kim Jong-Il's 1976 speech *On Understanding the Originality of Kimilsungism*, the speech that most clearly distinguished North Korea's political theory from Marxism-Leninism. In this speech, Kim did not only establish Juche's distinctiveness. He chastised those who only emphasized this aspect. In Kim's view, it was just as important to show that Kimilsungism inherited and protected the political core of Marxism-Leninism: its commitment to working class emancipation:

At present there is also a tendency to contrast Kimilsungism with Marxism-Leninism, allegedly to emphasize its originality. But its originality is not necessarily proved only by contrasting it with Marxism-Leninism, denying its derivations from the latter...Although Kimilsungism is an idea which represents a historical period different from that of Marxism-Leninism, it is closely connected with the latter because of the common class idea and objective to serve the revolutionary cause of the working class. Kimilsungism was founded and has been developed in the course of safeguarding and embodying the ideological and theoretical achievements of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>101</sup>

As with the statements of the Eternal President, the Kim Jong-Un regime continues to republish works by Kim Jong-Il in which he explicitly affirms Juche's Marxist-Leninist

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<sup>99</sup> Kim Il-Sung, *Works*, vol. 44 (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1999), pp. 313-314.

<sup>100</sup> Kim Il-Sung, *Ours is the Socialism of Juche* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2021).

<sup>101</sup> Kim, *Kimilsungism*.

basis, such as his 1986 speech *The Juche Idea is an Idea that has Inherited and Developed the Progressive Ideologies of Mankind*.<sup>102</sup>

The third piece of evidence is North Korea's higher education system. Kim Il-Sung University, the country's top education institution, still delivers courses on the 'History of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy', including 'dialectical materialism'.<sup>103</sup> This is significant, because Kim Jong-Un himself has confirmed that North Korea's ruling elite has traditionally contained many students from Kim Il-Sung University.<sup>104</sup>

The fourth, and perhaps the most important piece of evidence, is from the WPK itself. The party's Bylaws endorse 'Marxism-Leninism' and repudiate 'revisionism' to this day. North Korea's ruling political organization has retained these terms even after revising its Bylaws several times, which indicates that it still values them.<sup>105</sup>

These factors further indicate that North Korea's Marxist-Leninist principles are not superficial. They are a fundamental component of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. They remain important for understanding contemporary North Korean ideology, as well as the principles underlying the DPRK's domestic and foreign policy.

The implications of this article's analysis are threefold. First, the popular narrative, that North Korean ideology has departed from Marxism-Leninism since its inception, fundamentally misunderstands the ideas motivating Juche's development. North Korean political theory has developed not with the aim of abandoning Marxism-Leninism, but with the aim of upholding and defending the revolutionary working-class essence of Marxism-Leninism. Even Songun politics aims to uphold this principle. As such, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism repudiates Marxism-Leninism not because it thinks the doctrine is wrong, but because it thinks that the Soviet Union betrayed its revolutionary working-class principles, and thereby ruined its name and image. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism aims to safeguard these principles.

In fact, there is a case to be made that in some respects, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is closer to Marxism-Leninism than those claiming to endorse the latter. North Korea's conception of socialism in one country and economic planning is purer than the remaining socialist states, which feature higher levels of private enterprise and foreign investment. North Korea's class structure is more communist than China's, where huge wealth inequalities have emerged, and the socialist ethics of communitarianism and collectivism also remain stronger in the DPRK than elsewhere.

Second, despite the regime's claims to the contrary, North Korea's 'socialism of our style' has not eradicated the political principles that helped bring down soviet socialism. Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism believes that prioritizing ideological education will help it avoid the decline in popular support for socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern bloc. This belief, however, is mistaken, because many of these countries also placed a

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<sup>102</sup> Kim Jong-Il, *The Juche Idea is an Idea that has Inherited and Developed the Progressive Ideologies of Mankind* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2020).

<sup>103</sup> 'Faculty of Philosophy', *Kim Il-Sung University*, accessed September 1, 2021, <http://www.ryongnamsan.edu.kp/univ/en/about/organization/faculties/philosophy-faculty>

<sup>104</sup> Kim Jong-Un, *On the Basic Tasks Facing Kim Il-Sung University in the New Era of the Juche Revolution* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2016).

<sup>105</sup> Andrei Lankov, 'Where is North Korea Heading? Major Political Rule Changes May Tell Us', *NK News*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/06/where-is-north-korea-heading-major-political-rule-changes-may-tell-us/>

high value on ideology, and this did not save them. North Korea's focus on ideology may not prevent the rise of mass discontent.

Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism also advocates political institutions similar to those implemented in Marxist-Leninist states. Ultra-centralization, inefficiency, bureaucracy, and corruption have been endemic features of these 'socialist democracies', and they helped to bring them down. Because North Korean ideology defends a similar institutional framework, the government may face similar issues.

The same problems have plagued North Korea's planned economy, which has departed little from the inefficient Stalinist command economies of the now extinct Marxist-Leninist states. These centrally planned economies failed to increase living standards at a fast enough rate, and as a result, people gradually lost faith in the socialist system.

Thirdly, Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism exposes some inconvenient truths about Marxism-Leninism, truths that the latter's adherents do not want to admit. One of these is that socialist patriotism is barely distinguishable from nationalism. Both encourage people to promote their own nation's concerns above the international workers' movement, and that is why North Korea uses the terms interchangeably. Another inconvenient truth is that the party, leader, and state will remain in force under communism. Although Marxism-Leninism promises that communism will be a stateless society of political equality, this will not in fact be the case. Politically speaking, communism will look a lot like present day socialism.

One weakness of this comparative study is that it draws exclusively on English-language translations of Korean language sources. These contain only a fraction of North Korea's ideological discourse. Future comparative studies may benefit from examining the rich trove of untranslated Korean language sources, such as those published by the WPK's political magazine *Kulloja*, and its newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*. Doing so may enable a more precise picture of the relationship between Marxism-Leninism and Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.

Another weakness of this study is that it focused upon the fundamental political principles of Marxism-Leninism. In doing so, it was unable to examine the distinct variants of the doctrine that have emerged since its inception. 'Titoism' in Yugoslavia, 'Maoism' in China, and 'Ho Chi Minh Thought' in Vietnam are just three examples. Each of these ideologies has added their own unique principles to Marxism-Leninism. Future studies may further deepen understandings of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism by comparing it to one or several of these variants of Marxism-Leninism. Some scholars have already started this process with Maoism, which is an obvious choice, considering the long-established political relationship between China and North Korea.<sup>106</sup> There is certainly room for more work in this area.

The utilization of these methods and sources to expose North Korea's Marxism-Leninism will remain necessary in the future, for there can be little doubt that North Korean ideology will keep morphing, as it always has, in response to new domestic and international challenges. In line with their past presentations, North Korean ideologists will continue to portray their country's new political principles as distinctive and original. This article encourages scholars to treat these claims to originality carefully. The historical record suggests that North Korean political theory will not deviate from

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<sup>106</sup> Yong Soon Kim, 'Maoism and North Korean Strategic Doctrine', *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3:2 (1983), pp. 335-355; Alzo David-West, North Korea's Fascism and Stalinism: On B. R. Myers' *The Cleanest Race*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 41:4 (2011), pp. 151-154.

the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. The regime may reformulate and reskin these fundamentals under the guise of new labels, but it will find it hard to eradicate them. To truly abandon Marxism-Leninism, the Workers' Party of Korea would need to abandon the theories of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il, the theories that form the essence of Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. This is something that Kim Jong-Un has shown little intention of doing.