

The Rise of Kim Jong Eun and the Return of the Party

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Abstract

As it prepares a new ruling structure to support the 3rd generation power succession, the North Korean regime has recently undergone a dramatic reorganization within its ruling structures, creating an intertwined system of mutual surveillance and control in which a handful of powerful individuals hold overlapping positions in the highest governing bodies of the Party, Cabinet, and military. This reorganization has created confusion within the NDC hierarchy and cast doubt on whether the military-dominated *songun* system will continue to function, or the Party will reassert its dominance through a return to the traditional party-state system. As the regime currently faces serious challenges on several fronts, the outcome of this military-party power struggle will have major implications for the stability of the new system and its likely future course. This paper will assess the likely future direction of the North Korean governing system based on a review of the evolution of the existing *songun* system during the previous leadership succession and an analysis of the details of the recent reorganization and its implications for future power dynamics among the governing elites. In light of North Korea's recent erratic behavior, we will also explore the possibility of a power struggle between the hawks and doves among the elites.

Key Words: Kim Jong Eun succession system, military-party balance of power, the 3rd Party Delegates Conference, KWP personnel reorganization, *songun* governing system

Introduction

North Korea has now fully committed itself to the succession of Kim Jong Eun, 3rd son of Kim Jong-il, as its next supreme leader, and it is in the midst of implementing a plan to gradually install a new leadership structure around him. Kim Jong Eun, whose mere existence was not publicly acknowledged by the regime until this year, has recently vaulted in status to the position of vice chairman of the KWP Central Military Committee and was recently listed second after his father on the official roster of the State Funeral Committee for the late Jo Myong Rok, 1st vice chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC) – a strong indication of his actual status within the regime hierarchy. At the same time, Kim Jong Eun's aunt, uncle, and close friends have risen to influential positions in the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). Meanwhile, Kim Jong-il continues to rule the country as chairman of the NDC.

As it attempts to balance power between the rising KWP and the still-dominant NDC, the regime has recently reshuffled key personnel in the Cabinet, the NDC, and the leading Party organs, through an irregular session of the Supreme People's Assembly last May and a Party Delegates' Conference on September 28. Through this reorganization of personnel, the regime has created an intertwined system of mutual surveillance and control in which a handful of powerful individuals hold overlapping positions in the highest governing bodies of the Party, Cabinet, and military. The dominant figure within this system is Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law Jang Song Taek, who has been given sufficient influence to guide and protect the succession process through his own high status and the positioning of his close associates throughout the ruling structure. The reorganization has created confusion within the NDC hierarchy, and cast doubt on whether the NDC-dominated *songun* system will continue to function, or the KWP will reassert its dominance through a return to the traditional party-state system.

It remains to be seen how this new system will work and how it will evolve as the succession process moves forward. Meanwhile a series of external and internal developments threaten to disrupt the system in complex ways. If Kim Jong Eun is to gain acceptance as the successor, he will need to demonstrate strong leadership through bold new ventures, while still deferring to his father's leadership, and he will have to be able to evade responsibility if those ventures fail. To maneuver successfully through this delicate dance he will need the absolute support of a well-connected group made up of older, more respected elites from the military and the Party.

This paper seeks to address the question of whether the Party is truly returning to dominance in North Korea, or whether the military-dominated *songun* system will continue to hold ultimate sway. To do so, we will first review the evolution of the *songun* system through which Kim Jong-il has exercised total control for the past 13 years, and then analyze the ways in which that system appears to be changing recently to accommodate the succession plan. Finally we will offer some predictions for the stability of the new system and its likely future course.

The Songun System: 1997-Present

Songun was originally developed as the ruling ideology in North Korea to support Kim Jong-il's one-man authoritarian system as he consolidated power in the years after his father's death in 1994. North Korea formally codified its *songun* political system in 1998 with a revised Constitution which dramatically diminished the role of the Party within the state and increased the functionality of the military organization. Under the new structure, the NDC had direct control of People's Security, the Armed Forces Ministry, and State Security, bypassing both the Party

and the Cabinet.¹ The new Constitution also abolished the position of *Jusok* (head of state) and removed all references to it, since it was decided that no one could replace Kim Il Sung after his death.² Thus under *songun*, Kim Jong-il ruled not as head of state but as chairman of the NDC, eliminating the Party as a middleman and giving the leader direct control of the policymaking process in the Cabinet and the military.

For most of the Kim Il Sung era the KWP dominated policymaking in the North Korean system, in some ways taking on an even more influential role in the system than the CCP did in China's governing structure.³ However, after Kim Il Sung's death the role and functionality of the Party declined. There has been no Party Congress since 1980. The plenum of the Central Committee, which normally approves important personnel decisions within the Party, has not convened since December 1993; it did not meet even to elect a new secretary general of the Party after Kim Il Sung's death (instead, the KWP Central Committee and the Central Military Committee endorsed Kim Jong-il to formally take this position in October 1997). Because the plenum has not been fulfilling its role, important positions in the Party structure have remained vacant after their members died or retired. It is suspected that neither the Secretariat nor the Politburo has met since Kim Il Sung's death; these bodies would ordinarily take charge of the highest levels of KWP policymaking.⁴ Consequently, it is believed that the organs of the Party have been reduced to a largely symbolic role, while the NDC has become the most important governing body, and the military and State Security organizations have

¹- Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 2000), p. 118.

²- *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³- Gahb-chol Kim, "Changes in North Korean Communism," in *North Korean Communism: A Comparative Analysis*, Chongshik Chung and Gahbchol Kim (eds.) (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1980), pp. 406-408.

⁴- Choi Jinwook, "The Changing Party-State System and Outlook for Reform in North Korea," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2009, p. 154.

taken a greater role in actually running the country.

The purpose of *songun* was not to allow the military to take over and supplant the Party, but to use the military organization to control the population and support the Party's leadership. This system had its roots in the period of mourning after Kim Il Sung's death, when Kim Jong-il needed the backing of top military leaders to ensure his place in power. The military's role became even more crucial during the Arduous March period of the mid-1990s; during this period of economic hardship, Kim Jong-il mobilized the armed forces to restore the Party's leadership authority and to maintain control over society.

Through the *songun* system, Kim Jong-il took direct command of the military organization; it is said that his personal authorization is required for military exercises down to the battalion level.⁵ The military has taken on an important role in the national economy, being mobilized as a labor force for constructing public works, assisting in labor-intensive farming tasks, and even protecting harvests from thieves. Through military-controlled overseas "trading companies," military organizations have been tasked with the mission of earning much-needed foreign currency for the regime, and the high-level officers who run these operations are known to reap significant financial dividends for themselves, giving them high status in society and helping to secure their loyalty. As *songun* became systematized, the rapid expansion of this trading company phenomenon caused a small group of military elites to become influential figures within the regime with their own patronage groups.⁶

⁵ - Oh and Hassig, *North Korea*, p. 112.

⁶ - John S. Park, "North Korea, Inc.: Gaining Insights in to North Korean Regime Stability from Recent Commercial Activities," Working Paper, U.S. Institute of Peace, April 22, 2009, p. 9.

- External policy under *songun*

As explained above, under the *songun* system the military has more direct influence over policymaking through its heavy representation on the NDC. This has affected both inter-Korean relations and foreign policy. Through the NDC the military was able to take an increasingly dominant role, competing with and eventually superseding the authority of both the United Front Department (the KWP's inter-Korean relations organization) and the Foreign Ministry, neither of which are currently represented on the NDC.

In terms of foreign relations, the *songun* era can be divided roughly into two parts: from Kim Il Sung's death in 1994 until the 2nd nuclear crisis erupted in October 2002, and after. Before the nuclear crisis, North Korea had held an uneasy truce with the international community through the Agreed Framework and made outward attempts at engagement in the pursuit of foreign aid in order to recover from economic collapse, holding several major summits in Pyongyang in the early 2000s. After the nuclear crisis, however, the regime became increasingly preoccupied with using a combination of engagement and military blackmail to extort aid from the international community, and the hardliners in the regime became dominant as the international environment grew more confrontational and the efforts of reformers failed to produce satisfactory results.

For most of the *songun* period the regime benefited from generous aid from South Korea and the West, after the famine of the 1990s brought international attention to the failure of the North Korean economic system. During the Sunshine period (1998-2007) North Korea allowed carefully controlled inter-Korean cooperation projects in various areas. The Committee for the Promotion of Economic Cooperation, the body responsible for all inter-Korean projects during this period, was upgraded in May 2004 to a Cabinet-level organization. However, during this period the State Security mechanism carefully controlled the level of exchanges

and the military was able to intercept aid material for their own purposes. After South Korean President Lee Myung-bak took office in February 2008 and began emphasizing a more pragmatic, action-for-action approach to North Korean policy, inter-Korean relations sharply declined. Lee's election came as a shock to the North Korean regime, which reacted by sacking its South Korean specialists for failing to foresee the change in South Korean public opinion.

This coincided with and perhaps contributed to the increased dominance of the military and the NDC over the Cabinet in foreign policy. In the last two years several key military figures have been promoted to influential positions in the state hierarchy as an apparent reward for orchestrating military provocations or espionage activities against the South, such as the 2nd nuclear test, the attack on the Cheonan, and the attempt to assassinate defector Hwang Jang Yop. In cases like these, when military provocations lead to breakdowns in inter-Korean relations or international condemnations, it is the United Front and the Foreign Ministry which take the blame, while the military gets praise for another "great victory over foreign adversaries." Thus North Korea's increasingly aggressive foreign policy appears to be a sign of the military's growing influence over policy.

One thing that has remained mostly constant throughout the *songun* era has been the state of North Korea-China relations. Despite the nuclear tests and other provocations which have brought near-universal condemnation from the international community, China remains committed to supporting the regime in Pyongyang; while privately unhappy about having a nuclear wild-card for a neighbor, it still considers regime collapse a greater threat to its interests. China has never formally rebuked the regime for its nuclear programs, and in recent years it has succeeded in taking most of the bite out of any UN sanctions. Meanwhile, total trade volume between China and North Korea has steadily increased through-

out the *songun* era, from \$413 million in 1998 to nearly \$2.7 billion in 2009.⁷ Pyongyang's leaders know that they need China's continued support to survive. While China is unlikely to cut off support to the regime for any reason in the future, it may make increasing demands now that South Korean economic cooperation has essentially ceased and the regime has no alternative source of support.

- Internal policy under *songun*

In its domestic economic policy during this period the military's influence is less clear, and there is evidence of an evolving policy conflict between reform-minded technocrats in the Cabinet and traditionalists in the KWP. This conflict played out most clearly in the changing fortunes of two rival officials, reformist Pak Bong Ju (Prime Minister, April 2003-April 2007) and well-connected KWP leader Jang Sung Taek.

During the first half of the *songun* period the regime appeared to make several attempts at reform, most notably through the July 1 Economic Management Measure in 2002 and a series of joint ventures and special economic zones in Gaesong (November 2002), Mt. Kumgang (October 2002), and Shinuiju (September 2002). Even after the nuclear crisis erupted, reforms continued for several years under the leadership of Pak Bong Ju. These included a revised wage system, increased autonomy for cooperative farms and factories, the expansion of small-plot agriculture and public markets, and continuous growth in inter-Korean trade.⁸ Under Prime Minister Pak the role of the Cabinet advanced while the Party organizations continued to atrophy. The KWP departments dealing with economic issues were abolished and the number of paid party members was reduced. Younger and more professional personnel

⁷- The Korea International Trade Association, <http://www.kita.net/>.

⁸- Park Hyeong Jung, "Impact of the Currency Reform and Future Outlook: A Political-Economic Analysis," *KINU Online Series* No. 09-48, Dec. 10, 2009.

joined the Cabinet and economic bureaucracy. North Korea sought to streamline its economic policy structure by reducing the number of economic projects handled by the KWP and military and giving the Cabinet more authority to manage the economy.⁹ Meanwhile Jang Sung Taek was reportedly purged from his position as chief of the Party's Organization and Guidance Bureau sometime in late 2003 or early 2004.

However, Pak's reforms conflicted with the economic interests of the military and Party elites, and they were heavily dependent on foreign partners and large amounts of foreign development aid with no strings attached. The nuclear crisis, perhaps by design, effectively guaranteed that the reforms would not succeed. As the nuclear crisis deepened and North Korea became increasingly isolated from the international community, and particularly after the first nuclear test in 2006, the conflict heated up between the pro-reform faction and the traditional isolationist faction, with the reformers steadily losing ground and in some cases being purged for their failures. In late 2005 North Korea announced that it was restarting the Public Distribution System, which had ceased functioning during the economic crisis in the 1990s, and asked humanitarian aid groups to leave (the PDS system soon faltered again and aid continued). Meanwhile, Jang Sung Taek returned from obscurity and rejoined the inner power circle in 2005. The Pak Cabinet came under increasing pressure from the Party, until finally in April 2007 Premier Pak was dismissed and the Cabinet's authority over the economy was stripped due to the failure of economic reforms. After Pak Bong Ju faltered, the Party took control of the people's economy, and earlier reforms were stalled or rolled back.¹⁰

⁹- Choi Jinwook, "The Changing Party-State System and Outlook for Reform in North Korea," p. 158.

¹⁰- Lee Moo Chul, "Content and Outlook of the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly," Web Brief, The Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, June 22, 2010.

The status of the Party has been slowly rising since Jang Sung Taek re-emerged. The KWP Central Committee re-introduced the Department of Planning and Finance in October 2005, allowing it to take a renewed role in economic matters and diminishing the role of the Cabinet. In September 2007, the Commission on National Economic Cooperation was transferred over to the supervision of the KWP's Department of the United Front.¹¹ If the *songun* system was principally designed to justify the consolidation of status and policymaking power to Kim Jong-il over the Cabinet and the Party, then it is easy to surmise that the rise of the Party is a symptom of Kim Jong-il's increasing frailty and inability to govern, and an internal desire to diffuse central power and return policymaking to a more regular negotiated process through the Party structure.

In the last few years under *songun*, the regime has noticeably regressed in its domestic policies, making numerous attempts to reign in the influence of the markets and crack down on worrying trends among the population. In November in 2009 it enacted a currency reform that struck a devastating blow on the growing middle class who made their living off of the markets.¹² Popular resentment of these measures and a worrying influx of information about the outside world have led the regime to boost control measures. The regime's chief instrument for ferreting out malcontents and cracking down on outside influences is the State Security Agency, which in recent years has been controlled by Jang Sung Taek.

As Kim Jong-il's health deteriorated following his stroke in August 2008, the NDC was expanded and strengthened further. In April 2009 the Supreme People's Assembly ratified a new Constitution which

¹¹- Choi Jinwook, "The Changing Party-State System and Outlook for Reform in North Korea," p. 159.

¹²- Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "The Winter of Their Discontent: Pyongyang Attacks the Market," Peterson Institute for International Economics No. PB10-1, January 2010, p. 4.

increased the authority of the NDC and specified the chairman of the NDC as the supreme leader of the state. The NDC's role was defined as "the highest leading organ of the defense of national sovereignty." The 2009 Constitution also formally declared *songun* as the guiding ideology of the regime.¹³ Also in 2009, North Korea integrated the KWP's Operations Department and the Military Reconnaissance Bureau – the main espionage agencies of the Party and the military, respectively - into a single department under the NDC's control known as the General Reconnaissance Bureau.¹⁴ This reorganization signifies a directional change in Kim's strategy toward South Korea and a shift to a more aggressive stance; the Bureau is believed to have orchestrated the attack on the Cheonan last March.¹⁵ Major General Kim Young Chol, who was promoted immediately after the Cheonan attack, is in charge of this Bureau under General Oh Kuk Ryol's supervision.

Overall, we can see that although the regime experimented with policies of engagement, opening, and economic reform early in *songun* era, the limited nature of these policies and the worsening nuclear standoff doomed them to failure, allowing military leaders to justify a return to hard-line policies which serve their own interests, while the traditionalists in the Party have also staged a comeback in recent years.

¹³- "North Korea modifies its Constitution to reflect Kim Jong-il system," *The Hankyoreh*, Sep. 29, 2009.

¹⁴- Park Hyun Min, "N. Korean Spy Chief 'by Kim Jong-il's Side on Field Trip'," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 15, 2010, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/04/15/2010041500418.html.

¹⁵- Park Sung Kook, "Tasks of the General Bureau of Reconnaissance," *Daily NK*, May 7, 2010, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catId=nk02900&num=6341>.

Power Restructuring in the Cabinet and the Party in 2010: Paving the Way to Succession

As we have seen, the last few years under *songun* have seen the failure of most reform efforts, the deterioration of inter-Korean relations cutting off a major source of income for many, and increasing public knowledge of the outside world despite government crackdowns. The currency redenomination in late 2009 and subsequent disorder in the markets brought public dissatisfaction with the economy to the boiling point. The regime's reaction showed that for the first time since the famine of the 1990s it was clearly struggling internally over policy. In early February Prime Minister Kim Young Il apologized to a gathering of party officials for the failure of currency reforms and for the side effects of closing the markets – an unprecedented show of contrition from the North Korean leadership. KWP Planning and Public Finance Minister Pak Nam Gi got the blame for the failed policy and was publicly executed in March. These developments shed light on just how much trouble the policy failure and aftermath caused for the regime.

At a time when the regime was struggling to build up Kim Jong Eun's personality cult and advertise his abilities as a leader in order to pave the way for a smooth succession, it would not do to allow this kind of public discontent to simmer. The situation called for dramatic measures to boost the legitimacy of the leadership. Both the Party and the Cabinet needed to undergo significant personnel reshufflings to demonstrate to the people that individuals in the leadership were being held accountable and that the new leadership structure would be more capable of improving the people's livelihoods. Thus 2010 saw a series of major reorganizations, proceeding through a "surprise" extra session of the Supreme People's Assembly in May and a rare Party Delegates' Meeting in September.

- The 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly

The 3rd Session of the 12th SPA came as a surprise to Pyongyang watchers as it occurred just two months after the 2nd Session. Since the constitutional revision in 1998, these sessions have typically occurred only once a year. The only significant thing that happened between the 2nd Session in April and the 3rd Session in June was that Kim Jong-il made an unofficial visit to China; thus it is reasonable to assume that Chinese pressure had some influence on the decision to hold the 3rd Session.

The clearest signal from this session was that Jang Sung Taek had risen in stature to become effectively the No. 2 figure in the leadership behind Kim Jong-il, through his promotion to vice chairman of the National Defense Commission in addition to his already firm control of the People's Security and State Security Agencies. As Jang had joined the NDC only a little over a year earlier, his promotion to vice chairman marked one of the most rapid rises to power in the history of that body. This development provides a solid indication that Jang Sung Taek will play a key role in orchestrating the succession system. As Jang has always been first and foremost a Party leader, his promotion also indicates that the Party will take a more active role in ruling the country. "Ultimately, this Cabinet shuffle puts high-ranking Party members in the majority, supporting the Party's economic efforts and rearranging the Cabinet into a body supporting the economic endeavors of elite with ties to Jang Sung Taek."¹⁶

The other significant development at this session was the appointment of Choe Yong Rim, long-time secretary to Kim Il Sung and former chief secretary of Pyongyang, as the new head of the Cabinet, replacing Kim Young Il after three years. This appears to be an effort to appease the masses. Choe Yong rim was involved in the campaign to build 100,000

¹⁶- Lee Moo Chul, "Content and Outlook of the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly."

new housing units in Pyongyang, and thus his promotion boosts the image of the Party as working to improve the lives of the people. Together with the appointment of Kang Nung Su, Kim Rak Hui, Ri Tae Nam and Jon Ha Chol, this reshuffling gave high-ranking Party officials a majority of the positions in the Cabinet.

- The Party Delegates' Conference

Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about the Party Delegates' Conference was that it happened at all. The last time the KWP held a Delegates' Conference was in October 1966. Further, while this conference was announced several months in advance on June 26 and scheduled to take place "in early September," after the delegates had already begun to assemble in Pyongyang the conference was abruptly postponed two weeks; the official reason for the cancellation was the damage caused by torrential floods in July and August, but it is unusual for the Party to change its plans after they have been formally announced, and among Pyongyang watchers speculation was rife as to the actual reason for the delay.

It was anticipated that the main function of this conference would be to give Kim Jong Eun legitimacy through a promotion to some major position of power within the Party, and this expectation was partially fulfilled. While he was not given a position in the Organization and Guidance Department (through which his father had come to power), he was appointed Vice Chairman of the KWP Central Military Committee, which is "reputed to be the core decision-making group for the military and one of the most powerful Party organizations, alongside the Organization and Guidance Department."¹⁷ Also, a day before the conference, he was given the military rank of four-star general, thus preparing the

¹⁷- Oh and Hassig, *North Korea*, p. 116.

foundations of his military authority in advance of his entry into the Party leadership. While this move gives the young general few actual responsibilities, it increases his status considerably and puts him in position to take credit for any future successful policies enacted by either the Party or military.¹⁸

Many observers have noted the significance of the fact that Kim Jong Eun was promoted to power through a position on the KWP Central Military Committee, and not through the NDC as might have been expected. This has been widely hailed as a sign that the Central Party, and specifically the Central Military Committee, is being set up as a rival force to check the power of the NDC.

Contrary to expectations, Jang Sung Taek did not advance in status through this Party Delegates' Conference.¹⁹ Instead, several key figures close to Jang were placed in positions of influence in the Party governing structure. Kim Kyung Hee, Jang's wife and Kim Jong-il's sister, joined the Politburo and was given the rank of four-star general. Another new name dominating the leadership is KPA Chief of Staff Ri Young Ho, who was appointed to the Standing Committee of the Politburo, and who seems to have been charged with securing the military's support for Kim Jong Eun. Ri was promoted prior to the conference to the military rank of vice marshal, and his son is rumored to be a close friend of Kim Jong Eun.

Other new Politburo members include newly promoted Vice Premier Kang Sok Ju, who as 1st Vice Foreign Minister took the lead in negotiations with the U.S. over the nuclear issue and is another of Jang's associates; and Kim Guk Tae, another son of a famous partisan fighter, an

¹⁸ - Choi Jinwook, "WPK Reorganization and Its Policy Direction," *Vantage Point*, Vol. 33, No. 11, Nov. 2010.

¹⁹ - Prior to the conference, *JoongAng Daily* cited a report by an intelligence source stating that Jang would be named secretary of Organization and Guidance. "Jang Sung-taek to get North's No. 2 post: source," *JoongAng Daily*, August 31, 2010, <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2925370>.

early supporter of Kim Jong-il's rise to power, and a known opponent of reform and opening. New Politburo candidate members include Party Secretary Choi Ryong Hae, the son of partisan fighter Choi Hyun and a long-time friend of Kim Jong-il; Kim Jong Gak, who is currently 1st vice director of the Armed Forces Ministry's General Political Bureau and also an NDC member; and Senior Deputy Director of State Security Woo Dong Cheuk, who is Jang Sung Taek's underling, a KPA general and also an NDC member. These individuals, all with close ties to Jang Sung Taek and/or Kim Jong-il, appear to form the core of a front-line support group for backing up and protecting the Kim Jong Eun succession system; together, they have influence on the NDC, the Politburo, the State and Public Security Agencies, and the top military organizations.

About a month after the conference, Kim Jong Eun accompanied his father on his first publicized guidance visit to a KPA unit. This unit was actually a part of the State Security Agency, but it was promoted as the young leader's first official review of a military facility. Accompanying the father-son leadership on this trip were Ri Young Ho, Kim Jong Gak, and Woo Dong Cheuk.²⁰ In North Korea's informal, personality-driven leadership structure, accompanying the leader on a guidance tour tends to be a strong indication of status regardless of an individual's actual rank, and a look at the list of those accompanying this tour provides confirmation of who will be the most important backers in the new leadership structure.

Through the Party Delegates' Conference, the highest organs of the Party, which had remained dormant through the *songun* era, were restored and many vacant positions were filled. The members of the Politburo increased from 3 to 17, and candidate members increased from 5 to 15. The Secretariat also grew from 5 to 10. Looking at the new

²⁰ - "Kim Jong-il Inspects Command of KPA Unit," *KCNA*, October 25, 2010.

personnel, we can observe a shift in the central focus of the ruling system from the NDC to the Party. Of the 17 permanent members of the Politburo, only 5 are also on the NDC, and of the 15 candidate members, only 4 are NDC members.²¹

In order to fill this sudden wealth of new positions in the power structure, in the months leading up to the Party Delegates' Conference there had been a reshuffling of major positions, and several chief secretaries of provincial committees had been promoted to Pyongyang. During the Supreme People's Assembly session in June, the Chief Secretaries of South Hwanghae Province and South Pyongan Province were made vice premiers of the Cabinet; later, in June and July, the chief secretaries of North and South Hamkyung provinces were appointed to the Central Committee of the Party. Shortly before the Party Delegates' Conference, the Chief Secretaries of North Pyongan Province and Jagang Province were both promoted to the Central Party and made candidate members of the Politburo. Mun Kyeong Duk (chief party secretary for Pyongyang City) and Kim Kyeong Ok (1st Vice Director of the Organization and Guidance Department, seen as an official who can offer good military guidance) are also among the emerging group of elites who have risen to advanced positions in the Party as part of the succession plan. Maneuvering these comparatively young figures, most in their 60s, into the core of the leadership will help stabilize the succession as they replace unreliable or infirm members of the current ageing leadership.²²

The recent personnel reorganizations have also helped to advance what appears to be a "generation shift" in the military. In addition to Ri Young Ho and Kim Jung Gak, members of this new military leadership include Choi Bu Il (recently promoted four-star general, vice chief of KPA

²¹- Choi Jinwook, "WPK Reorganization and Its Policy Direction," p. 26.

²²- Shin Joo Hyun, "Reshuffle Continues with Provincial Changes," *Daily NK*, Sept. 26, 2010, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01800&xnum=6831>.

General Staff), Kim Myung Guk (director of the General Staff Operations Bureau, member of the KWP Central Military Committee), Jung Myung Do (commander-in-chief of the Navy), Hyun Young Chul (8th Army commander), and Kim Young Chul (director of KPA Reconnaissance Bureau).²³ Of the above, Kim Myung Guk, Jung Myung Do, and Kim Young Chul are suspected by South Korean intelligence sources of having been involved with the Cheonan incident.²⁴ These new leaders are taking over from the old military group which was dominated by Oh Kuk Ryol and Kim Il Chol, presumably to give the next generation leadership a firmer grip on the military. There is also some speculation that this reshuffling was orchestrated by Jang Sung Taek, on the grounds of defending Kim Jong Eun, but in fact due to Jang's personal fear that members of the old military guard might oppose his overwhelming grip on power. But another explanation could simply be that many of the current military leaders are very advanced in years, and the regime has become more aware of how infirmities or sudden deaths in the upper leadership could destabilize the system.

- China's growing influence

One factor behind the recent restoration of the Party's status could be Chinese influence. While China has long been the DPRK's most important and reliable supporter, in the past North Korea always maintained alternative sources of support: during the Cold War, it played on the feud between China and Russia; until the late 1990s significant funds came from ethnic Koreans in Japan; and during the Sunshine Era it could rely on aid from South Korea and the international community. But now,

²³- Kim Jin Ha, "North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook," *KINU Online Series* No. 10-40, Nov. 3, 2010.

²⁴- Hyun Gun, "The Five Culprits of the Cheonan Incident," *Open Radio for North Korea*, May 27, 2010.

South Korea has cut off most economic cooperation in the wake of the Cheonan incident, and the international community is alienated by the unending nuclear saga; thus, for the first time in DPRK history, it is completely dependent on Chinese support for survival. This gives China unprecedented leverage over the North Korean regime, and China can be expected to use this leverage to its best advantage in reaping benefits for Chinese businesses and shaping the succession system in a form it prefers. There is evidence that China may already be taking advantage of its influence to demand more economic benefits in exchange for its support, such as exclusive rights to mineral or ocean resources, the leasing of North Korean territory to China for casinos and tourism ventures,²⁵ and permission to use the North Korean port of Rajin-Sonbong as part of Chinese plans to develop the Changchun-Jilin-Tumen economic belt.

It is possible that in addition to pushing for economic reforms, the Chinese Communist Party leadership has been encouraging some of the recent systemic reforms in order to stabilize the North Korean regime around the Party. With their own party-dominated system, Chinese leaders may see a return to more normalized, party-centric governance and a return to a socialist state system as the best way to restore the fractured North Korean party-state system and manipulate North Korea toward reform through the strong ties between the two Communist Parties. In an interesting parallel, at the CCP plenary session on October 18, Xi Jinping, who is widely considered Hu Jintao's successor as the next Chinese president, was appointed vice president of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission – the precise Chinese counterpart to Kim Jong Eun's new position.²⁶

²⁵ - *Hankuk Ilbo*, Oct. 28, 2010, <http://kr.news.yahoo.com/service/news/shellview.htm?articleid=2010102802314696307&linkid=4&newssetid=1352&from=rank>.

²⁶ - "Xi Jinping appointed vice-chairman of Central Military Commission," *Xinhua*, Oct. 18, 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-10/18/c_13563001.htm.

An examination of the historical relationship between the Party and the military in China naturally reveals similarities with the North Korean system. Mao famously said that “Political power grows from the barrel of a gun,” but he also said “The Party must always control the gun, the gun must never control the Party.” In the early Chinese system, “soldiers were expected to assume responsibilities for organizing the masses and helping the CCP to establish political power. Within the army, party control was exercised through a hierarchy of party committees headed by commissars, and paralleling the military chain of command at all levels.”²⁷ Thus in the Chinese model, goals of the military were subordinate to or aligned with the goals of the Party. China also placed high emphasis on maintaining a positive image of the military among the people, encouraging the military to be economically self-sufficient, and holding up “the army as a model for society” – all elements that can be found in the modern North Korean system. During the Cultural Revolution, a majority of the members of the Politburo and the Party Central Committee were also military officers. As China entered an era of reform in the 1980s, military membership on the politburo waned. Today, there are only two officers remaining in the Politburo, and none on the Politburo Standing Committee.²⁸ China clearly has learned the importance of separating the military from government policymaking, and it may attempt to use its influence to teach the North Koreans the same lesson.

Chinese involvement in North Korean affairs has expanded significantly in the last year, although it is still unclear to the outside world what this involvement means. What is known is that this year Kim Jong-il took the unprecedented step of making two visits to northeast China within four months, and both times he met with top Chinese leaders who

²⁷– June Teufel Dreyer, *China's Political System* (2nd ed.), Paragon House, 1993, p. 190.

²⁸– Kenneth Allen, “Assessing the PLA's Promotion Ladder to CMC Member Based on Grades vs. Ranks,” *China Brief*, August 5, 2010.

issued public statements on the value of economic reform. Further, China recently appointed an influential member of its Politburo Standing Committee, Zhou Yongkang, to take charge of North Korean affairs. Zhou made a prominent appearance on the balcony alongside Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong Eun at the festivities marking the 65th anniversary of the KWP's founding on October 10, and reportedly bestowed gifts upon both Kim Jong-il and his son. North Korea wanted the foreign press to stand up and take note of this display of homage to the young leader by one of China's top officials. In a recent editorial in the *Asia Times Online*, infrequent contributor Kim Myong Chol, known as an "unofficial spokesman of Pyongyang," specifically mentioned Zhou's gift to Jong Eun as one of "three noteworthy developments in October."²⁹ The party secretaries of China's three northeastern provinces also attended the anniversary festivities and met with their North Korean counterparts, the party secretaries of the four North Korean provinces bordering China.

For its part, North Korea recently appointed a new ambassador to China, Ji Jae Ryong, a deputy director in the KWP Information and Publicity Department with ties to Jang Song Taek. A week after the KWP anniversary, a major delegation composed of all 12 of North Korea's provincial party secretaries was sent on an official tour of China, where they were hosted by Zhou Yongkang and briefed on China's next five-year development plan. Then, in early November North Korea's new Prime Minister Choi Yong Rim led another delegation on a tour of northeast China. This flurry of exchanges and new personnel appointments indicates that both countries are eager to bolster their relationship and forge ties between the new leadership elites on both sides, at both the Central Party and provincial levels.

²⁹- Kim Myong Chol, "Young general has hidden depths," *Asia Times Online*, Oct. 19, 2010, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/LJ19Dg01.html>.

Future Political Stability and Policy Direction

As it works to secure the succession system, the regime will take on a series of initiatives: diplomatic overtures using the nuclear card as leverage; economic partnerships (largely with Chinese corporations); negotiations to restart aid programs with South Korea; military provocations and testing of advanced weaponry, etc. If these initiatives succeed, it will be attributed to Kim Jong Eun's leadership skills. His newly acquired position allows him to take credit in a number of areas. If the military sector takes on a successful project to improve the peoples' livelihoods, makes another provocation against the South, or performs another successful test of advanced weaponry or nuclear weapons, Kim Jong Eun can take credit through his status as a four-star general and his position on the Party Central Military Committee. If the Party promotes new economic or social policies that are popular with the people, he can take credit through his position in the Party. If these ventures fail, however, an expendable Party or military official will be set up to take the blame.

During this time of transition, finances will increasingly become an issue as the regime begins to feel the crunch of additional financial sanctions by the U.S. and the near-total cessation of inter-Korean trade. On top of this, as the Party takes on a more active role in government, some state funds and resources will have to be shifted from the military to the Party. As the military and the Party are forced to share limited resources, the regime will face the unenviable task of keeping military leaders content while siphoning off more of their special rights and privileges to the Party.

It is important to remember that this transition to the succession system is not taking place in a vacuum; it is one of many factors currently shaping the actions of the regime. One of the most important of these factors is China's increasing influence. As China today has become Pyongyang's sole remaining lifeline for economic support, it enjoys un-

precedented leverage over the North Korean regime. Chinese support will become more important as the cash-strapped regime struggles to keep the elites in its new multi-polar leadership structure from squabbling over privileges. China may take advantage of its influence to demand more economic benefits in exchange for its support, or even endeavor to shape the new succession system in a way that will be easier for it to control.

Another recent factor is the growing realization that the regime does not have as much control over the population as it once did. Despite numerous crackdowns, it has been unable to stop the flow of information across the border or even prevent the children of the elites from enjoying foreign DVDs and radio broadcasts.³⁰ The failure of the currency reform was a shock to the North Korean leadership, as it was forced to accept that it can no longer assert complete control over the small but growing pro-market forces within the country. As the elites absorb the idea that some elements within the country are no longer under their control and that their grip on the country is seriously threatened, their solidarity will increase and they may be willing to accept somewhat reduced privileges as part of the cost of maintaining the system. The mid-level Party and military officials may squabble amongst themselves over privileges and resources, but no one will dare to challenge the upper leadership on major policy issues. To further solidify its control, the regime will need to enact periodic purges, either to provide scapegoats for failed policies or to serve as an extra warning to the elites about the dangers of stepping out of line. The next few years will be a dangerous time to be a North Korean official.

Jang Sung Taek is well aware of the danger of being too close to the top, having suffered a purge himself in the recent past; he will take careful steps to ensure that he is the orchestrator, not the victim, of any future purges. His network of allies in the new leadership structure will help to

³⁰- Andrew Scobell, "Kim Jong-il and North Korea: The Leader and the System," Strategic Studies Institute, March 2006, pp. 31-32.

monitor all important Party and military organizations for potential trouble-makers. By now most of Jang's former rivals have died or disappeared from power. The only foreseeable danger to Jang Sung Taek is the possibility that the succession system might somehow get fatally derailed while Kim Jong-il is still alive. As Jang was entrusted with the sacred task of ensuring that Kim Jong Eun has a smooth path to power, he will have to take ultimate responsibility if those plans fall apart. After Kim Jong-il's death, Jang's position will be secure, as no one will have an independent base of power from which to challenge him. What he does at that point – whether he will be content to pull the strings while allowing Kim Jong Eun to rule, or try to seize power for himself – is open to speculation.

North Korean sources in China have implied that General Oh Kuk Ryol may be on the outside of the succession structure, possibly because he is one of the few remaining top elites not under Jang Sung Taek's patronage. Oh has long been a trusted aide of Kim Jong-il and was promoted last year to vice chairman of the NDC; he was in charge of espionage operations against South Korea from 1989 to 2009 as director of the KWP Operations Department, and was given control of the General Reconnaissance Bureau when it was created in 2009. Oh's powerful position and the rumored investigations of his close associates³¹ seem to suggest that Jang feels threatened by him. Oh also controls a major trading company in China and is said to be in competition with Jang over who can produce the most foreign currency income for the country.³² This competition between Oh and Jang could be seen as a microcosm of the broader power struggle between the military and the Party; therefore the

³¹- Shin Joo Hyun, "Traders Living in Fear of Pyongyang Summons," *Daily NK*, Nov. 8, 2010, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catId=nk01500&xnum=6984>.

³²- "Bigwigs in North vie for power over investments," *JoongAng Daily*, July 5, 2010, <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2922711>.

outcome will have important implications for the future direction of the regime's governing structure. If Oh is replaced as head of the Reconnaissance Bureau or demoted to a lower position on the NDC, for instance, it will signify that Jang Sung Taek has grown confident of his complete control over personnel decisions in the new leadership structure.

Overall, control will be the regime's top priority for the next several years. It is highly unlikely that they will experiment with reform or opening to any meaningful degree; they will focus on new joint ventures and other means of acquiring foreign currency. Their goal in inter-Korean relations will be to get the South to abandon its demand for an apology for the Cheonan and restart economic cooperation. To achieve this, the North may offer promises of continued family reunions, high-level military talks, or formal reinstatement of the inter-Korean agreements they recently abandoned. On the nuclear issue, they are eager to restart the Six-Party Talks in order to gain more energy and economic assistance in exchange for some gestures of compromise, but they will not take any concrete, irreversible steps toward denuclearization. Their status as a nuclear power is the main achievement of the Kim Jong-il years and thus is essential to maintaining popular perceptions of the regime's legitimacy.

Conclusion

Kim Jong-il's rise to power went through two distinct phases. From his initial unofficial designation as successor at the KWP Politburo meeting in 1974 until the time of his father's death in 1994, Kim rose through the ranks of the Party, and during that period the Party had an extremely influential role in government at all levels. After his father passed away and Kim Jong-il secured the sole leadership position, the Party declined and Kim Jong-il took direct control through the *songun* system. This allowed him to bypass the Party decision-making system and thus

eliminated the danger of a powerful rival emerging through the Party structure.

Today, Kim Jong-il's son and designated successor Kim Jong Eun does not have the luxury of time that his father had, and the regime appears to be trying to compress this two-step succession process into a single step. Once again the Party is being restored and given an active role in policymaking, so that the successor can rise through its structure and achieve legitimacy. But at the same time, the supreme leader Kim Jong-il is still maintaining direct control of the country through the NDC.

There appear to be three principle considerations at work behind the recent rise of the Party. The first is the need to provide a backbone of legitimacy for the Kim Jong Eun succession through the institution of the Party. The second is the need to balance the power of the NDC; to do so they have restored the leading Party organs and strategically placed reliable friends and relatives of Kim Jong-il in overlapping positions in all the key organizations of the Party and the military. The third factor at work is the increasing dependence on China and the need to boost cooperation between the Chinese and North Korean leaders via the parallel Party structures of the two countries.

Ultimately what this means for the future of North Korea is that the governing structure is undergoing a fundamental shift from absolute one-man rule to a system of distributed power and collective leadership. This shift is inevitable since Kim Jong-il is unwilling to entrust supreme power to anyone other than a direct descendant, and Kim Jong Eun is still too inexperienced and lacks the power base necessary to take over absolute control. In this situation balancing power between rival organizations will be a major challenge, and the worsening financial situation will exacerbate this. But the primary goal uniting the elites in the military and the Party is the desire to regain control – of the economy, of society, and of the central government. Thus, while rivalries may intensify, they will not

seriously threaten to unseat the Kim family regime, and dramatic reforms will be avoided in favor of a return to traditional social control.

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