

Political Dynamics of Hereditary Succession in North Korea

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the background, problems and political dynamics related to the hereditary succession currently underway in North Korea. The succession to Kim Jong-un has been prepared amid relatively challenging internal and external conditions. The consolidation of Kim Jong-un's power should solve three political challenges. The first is to inherit and repackage Kim Jong-il's power legacy. The second is to reorganize the party-state's higher power agencies and adapt them to new realities in the country. The third is to build Kim Jong-un's own personal power base. There are four main structural factors which can influence the future trajectories of political succession and North Korean politics: regime survival and hereditary succession; ruler-state relations; ruler-society relations; relations between foreign powers and domestic actors. The combination of these four structural factors and the four political actors within and without the regime - hard-liners, soft-liners, moderate oppositions and maximalist oppositions - will determine the future trajectories of North Korean politics.

Key Words: hereditary succession, regime survival, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, political change

Introduction

Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008 and retreated from the public stage for two months. Following his return in October 2008, two important changes were initiated. First, North Korea's internal and external policies have become significantly tougher. Second, the hereditary succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un has been promoted in earnest. In fact, these two factors have become intermingled, making it hard to differentiate the one from the other.

Since 2009, North Korea's core political agenda has been to promote the hereditary succession. In this regard, there have been several reorganizations of personalities and agencies, and Kim Jong-un has been named as the initiator of North Korea's major actions and policies. The major elements of the reorganization included: a revision of the Constitution and a reshuffle of personnel and agencies carried out from February to April 2009; the selection of Jang Sung Taek as a vice chairman of Defense Commission and the appointment of a new premier and ministers at the extraordinary Supreme People's Assembly session in June 2010; and the restoration of various offices of the Central Party and the emergence of new officials at the Party Delegate's Congress in September 2010. The incidents and policies reportedly made for or initiated by Kim Jong-un included the '150- and 100-day production battles' in 2009, the launch of the 'Kwangmyong satellite' in April 2009, the fireworks rally in May 2009, the currency exchange measures in November 2009, the artillery firing exercises in the West Sea and the attack on the Cheonan in March 2010, Kim Jong-il's visits to China in May and August 2010, the second meeting in a year of the Supreme People's Assembly in June 2010, and the Party Delegate's Conference in September 2010. The second nuclear device test in May 2009 was the only major event for which Kim Jong-un was not made responsible.

This paper analyzes the background, problems and political dynamics related to the hereditary succession currently underway in North Korea. Section two is devoted to pointing out the deteriorating conditions threatening regime survival as coincidental background to the political succession. The third section elucidates three political challenges to be overcome in establishing the succession. First is the task of inheriting and repackaging Kim Jong-il's power legacy. Second is the need to reorganize and adapt the party-state's higher power agencies to new realities in the country. Third is the need to build Kim Jong-un's own personal power base. Section four of this paper specifies four main structural factors which may influence the future trajectories of political succession and North Korean politics: the first is regime survival and hereditary succession; the remaining three concern the development of ruler-state, ruler-society, and foreign power-domestic actor relations, respectively. Section five of this paper will assess regime stability and the possibility of political change in the process of or after the succession.

The Advent of the Double Crisis of Regime Survival and Hereditary Succession

The period from late 2008 to early 2009 could be seen as a turning point which opened a new era in North Korean politics. In this period the regime was confronted with a double crisis of regime survival and political succession. Usually the two are unrelated. When Kim Jong-il was designated as successor, North Korea remained relative stable internally and enjoyed relatively secure environment externally. Conversely, as will be discussed, Kim Jong-un's succession is being prepared amid relatively challenging internal and external conditions. In a nutshell, North Korea currently suffers from the dual stresses of planning a political succession and struggling for regime survival amid demanding conditions. Of the

two, regime survival is more important than the success of the hereditary succession. Only when the regime was able to overcome the challenges to its survival can the succession be accomplished.

Challenges and Crisis for Regime Survival

North Korea has pursued five strategic objectives, which will be discussed below, since 2005. By August 2008, it had become clear that all five objectives have run up against serious difficulties. There are two options in this situation. The first one is to change or revise the objectives and the second is to break through the difficulties. North Korea opted for the latter in late 2008 and early 2009, by toughening its policy positions both domestically and externally.

What, then, are these five strategic objectives? The first is to increase and enhance the North's nuclear arsenal and to gain acknowledgment as nuclear power. The second is to normalize relations and conclude a peace treaty with the U.S., while still being acknowledged as a nuclear power. The third is to avoid discussing nuclear issues with South Korea and to manipulate inter-Korean relations in such a way as to induce the South to assist the North Korean regime economically. The fourth is to maintain an anti-reformist policy domestically through such measures as strengthening repression against the market while actively promoting foreign currency-earning businesses through export enclaves, mineral exports, and foreign assistance. The fifth is to maintain internal political supremacy by strengthening various internal security organizations and measures, and thereby create favorable conditions for the hereditary succession to be successful.

The prospect for achieving those objectives was not so bad at least from February 13, 2007 to the end of that year.¹ While the second inter-

¹- Park Hyeong Jung, *Bughan 'byeonhwa'eui jaepyeonggawa daebugjeongchaeg banghyang* [Revisiting North Korea's 'Change' and Suggestions for North Korea Policy] (Seoul: KINU,

Korean summit seemed to have guaranteed a continuous flow of assistance from the South, North Korea strengthened its repression of market activities noticeably since October 2007. Regrettably for North Korea, however, conditions have deteriorated since 2008 with the emergence of a conservative administration in South Korea. South Korea's new administration took a more principled position on such issues as denuclearization, assistance to the North, and the conclusion of peace treaty, and intensified cooperation with the U.S. By August 2008, it had become clear that the negotiations on denuclearization had reached a deadlock. Simultaneously, Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke. All this meant that North Korea was confronted with not only worsening external conditions but also a high potential for internal instability. It was believed that North Korea would not only be contained and sanctioned because of its nuclear weapons development but also not be able to maintain internal stability under its anti-reformist economic policy without a continuous flow of massive assistance from the South. If North Korea could not reverse the situation, its regime would become doomed. In reaction to these grim prospects, the North Korean regime took on aggressive postures both internally and outwardly. Since the end of 2008, North Korea has taken a tougher line in foreign policy in an effort to coerce South Korea and the U.S. to accept the strategic objectives mentioned above, while also toughening up its domestic policy to increase control over the society.

Three Political Challenges to a Successful Succession

From the Kim Jong-il's standpoint, the problem of succession came up at an unfavorable time. Just when external and internal conditions

were getting worse, Kim Jong-il's health deteriorated, making it imperative to start the hereditary succession in earnest. The problem is that in personal dictatorships, the changing of the supreme leader creates a period of increased potential for instability.²

For Kim Jong-il and Co., hereditary succession must have been the best option. This is because power has been based on personal loyalty to Kim Jong-il and authority has been concentrated in him. Thus, hereditary succession is advantageous in several ways. First, it protects the incumbent ruler during the process of power succession.³ Unlike other candidates, the son is less inclined to betray the incumbent ruler in order to accelerate the speed of succession or to protect himself from the incumbent. Second, the hereditary succession is a better choice for guaranteeing the continuity of the current distribution of power and established privileges. In such an extremely concentrated system of power as North Korea has, if one of the incumbent's lieutenants were to become a successor, the power distribution would be seriously disturbed. This could lead to serious power struggles among the elites, driving the whole political system into crisis or making it necessary to eliminate some of them. In comparison, a hereditary succession could be achieved rather peacefully without seriously disturbing the current status of the elites or their system of privileges.

Based on this background, in consolidating Kim Jong-un's power the regime must solve three political challenges: first, the inheritance and repackaging of Kim Jong-il's power legacy; second, the reorganization of central agencies so as to make them more compatible with the changed conditions; third, the building of Kim Jong-un's independent power base.

²- Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), pp. 151-161; Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics* 59 (July 2007), pp. 595-828.

³- Jason Brownlee, *ibid*, pp. 595-828.

Inheriting and Repackaging Kim Jong-il's Power Legacy

As mentioned, a hereditary succession attempts not to disturb the established privileges of incumbent elites. This involves an informal contract in which loyalty is offered to the new leader in exchange for preservation of established privileges. In this regard, Kim Jong-un's power structure should inherit the organizations and personalities established during Kim Jong-il's rein without many changes. After the Party Delegate's Conference in September 2010, it has been mostly the existing members of the elite who have been promoted and have filled the empty posts of the restored central party organizations.⁴ It is also observed that many sons of the old guard have been elevated to the status of new leaders of the system, and some of the younger ones in their early forties and late thirties have organized an exclusive club called 'Pongwhacho' and promoted themselves.⁵ All these developments tacitly signal that in general the status of incumbent elites will not change much, even with the power succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un. This does not mean that the new power structure for Kim Jong-un will remain the same as his father's. The central power organizations and their relations may experience changes, while some may have to be purged and new ones promoted. This will be discussed below.

Reorganization of Central Power Agencies

Since the 1990s, not only have North Korea's economy and society experienced significant changes but also the regime's style of rule has been

⁴-Cheon Hyun Joon, "North Korea's 3rd KWP Delegates' Conference: Analysis and Outlook," *KINU Online Series*, co 10-36.

⁵-Jang Yong Hun, "Bughan '2se jeongchi' myeonmyeon ... seungseungjanggu vs. bangtang group" ["Aspects of the second generation politics ... some are promoting themselves ... some are living a dissipated life"], *The Unified Korea* (May 2011), pp. 30-41.

adapted to a changing environment. Unlike the late 1980s, when the party was regarded as the core instrument of Kim Jong-il's rule, since 1995 the regime's 'military-first politics' have been dominant and other changes have come about.⁶ The organizational composition and role distribution in the upper power agencies should be modified for Kim Jong-un's rein to reflect the new conditions of rule in North Korea. In this regard, Kim Jong-un's future rein will be supported by the three main pillars of the military, the security organizations and the party.

The Military

The North Korean power system supporting Kim Jong-il's personal rein was reorganized in the mid-1990s around a central core of the military, replacing the Party which had hitherto filled that role. This change was represented by the introduction of 'military-first politics' in 1995 and was intended to deal with the increased challenges to regime survival at the time due to the virtual collapse of the state's economic planning and ration systems, the decreased impact of the Party's ideological and organizational work, and the increase in activities outside the direct purview of the Party-state structure, such as market expansion.

In early 2009, with the revision of the Constitution and personnel reinforcements, the Defense Commission, as the representative organization of 'military-first politics,' enhanced its stature and practical importance.⁷

⁶- Jinwook Choi and Meredith Shaw, "The Rise of Kim Jong-Eun and the Return of the Party," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2010, pp. 177-185; Park Hyeong Jung, *Kim Jong-il sidaeui bughaneui jeongchicheje* [North Korea's Political System during Kim Jong-il's Rein] (Seoul: KINU, 2004).

⁷- Baeg Seung Ju, "2009 bughan heonbubeui gubgangwuiwonhoe(jang) gwonhan ganghwaedamgin gugnae jeongchijeog hameui pyeongga" ["The political meaning of the promoted status of the Defense Commission and its Chairman in the 2009 constitutional revision"], Seminar on the revision of the Constitution in 2009 and changes in North Korean system held by the Research Institute for Security Studies in Seoul (October 20, 2009), pp. 67-82.

This change was facilitated by heightened concerns of a regime survival crisis and demonstrated the regime's readiness to implement tougher policies in order to deal with the crisis. North Korea's tougher external policy since the late 2008 seems to have been implemented by a new group of younger generals who have advanced quickly since 2008.⁸ These are led by Lee Young Ho (currently chief of General Staff, vice chairman of the Party Central Military Commission and permanent member of the Politburo Standing Committee) and consolidated in the Party's Central Military Commission, to which Kim Jong-un was nominated as vice chairman at the Party Delegate's Conference in September 2010.

It can be construed that the military has taken advantage of the enhanced feeling of crisis and the necessity for a tougher attitude toward the outside in order to enhance its own political voice and status. In other words, North Korea's tougher external policy originated partly from the military's interest in enhancing its domestic political status and thereby pressuring other domestic actors to respect the military's privileges. As a high-level South Korean official mentioned in February 2011, "The military has taken an important role in North Korea's decision-making from August 2008, when Kim Jong-il had his stroke, up to today."⁹ It can also be observed that in economic matters, the military has maintained its voice¹⁰: the military has rather successfully resisted the measures for downsizing which have been pursued by the Central Party

⁸-Go Jae Hong, "Bughaneui daenamjeongchaeggwa woorieui daeeung bangan" ["North Korea's South Korea policy and suggestions for our policy"], Annual spring seminar held by North Korea Studies Association on March 27, 2009.

⁹-No Hyodong and Jeong Myo Myeong, "Bug gunbu, Mie idaerogamyeon haegchamhwa gyeonggo" ["North Korea's military warned the U.S. of nuclear disaster, if things continue as they are now"], *Yonhap News*, February 21, 2011.

¹⁰-Park Hyeong Jung, "Bughaneui hugyecheje guchuggwa naebu jeongse (2010-2011)" ["North Korea's succession and domestic politics"], Seminar on North Korea's succession and the issue of denuclearization co-hosted by the International Association for Regional Studies and the Korea Institute for National Unification (April 13, 2011), pp. 19-20.

since 2005¹¹; some important economic-vested interests were transferred from the Party to the military since 2009; in dealing with the negative aftermath of the currency exchange measures in 2010, the military vetoed measures detrimental to its interests; and the trade companies affiliated with the military still play a critical role in North Korea's foreign currency earning activities.

All these activities by the military hint at its efforts to play a pivotal role in the succession process from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un and to remain as a dominant player in the future North Korean power politics. This means, on the one hand, that Kim Jong-un's power system will be dependent on the military's support and, on the other that Kim Jong-un must reorganize and rein in the military in order to be successful as heir.

The Security Organizations

Next to the military, the security organizations will make up the core of Kim Jong-un's power base. As moves to build up Kim Jong-un's power have started in earnest since January 2009, Kim Jong-il has reportedly given him some basic guidance for setting up his personal power structure: "My political structure has been centered on the military; General Kim (Jong-un) should adopt an information-based political system centered on the Ministry of State Security."¹² In reality, it can be verified that Kim Jong-un has endeavored to construct his power structure mainly based on organizations related to security and information, while enhancing the status of the latter in North Korea's politics. He reportedly took over leadership of the Ministry of State Security in March 2009.¹³ In May of

¹¹ - Park Hyeong Jung, "Kim Jong-il, the Military and the Party, and Kim Jong-un: The Power Politics behind Market Expansion and Market Crackdown," *KINU Online Series*, co 10-12.

¹² - Kim Jong Hyun, "Bug hugyeja Kim Jong-un choegeun sajin gonggae" ["North Korea goes public with Kim Jong-un's recent picture"], *Yonhap News*, April 20, 2010.

¹³ - Bag Seong U, "Kim Jong-uni bugghan nae bimilgyeongchal jjojigin guggaenjeonbowibueui

the same year, U Dong Chuk, the Vice Minister of State Security, was promoted, completing an advancement from major (April 1992) to lieutenant general in 17 years; U was simultaneously elected as vice chairman of Defense Commission. In addition, after one year, he was promoted once again in April 2010 to the rank of general. The status of the Ministry of People's Security was upgraded when Ju Sang Sung, the minister of People's Security, was promoted to the Defense Commission.¹⁴ In addition, the Korean affix on the name of the Ministry of People's Security was upgraded from 'seong' to 'bu,' and its affiliation was changed from the Cabinet to the Defense Commission.¹⁵ This signaled that this ministry will prevail among security-related organizations, whereas the Ministry of State Security dominated during the first half of the 1990s and the Military Security Command dominated after 1995. In addition, in early 2009 Kim Jong-un merged the Operations Department and Bureau 35 under the Central Party with the Reconnaissance Department under the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. The new organization was named the General Department of Reconnaissance, and Kim Jong-un reportedly took charge of all authority over its management.¹⁶ Furthermore, the father and son have increased their on-the-spot guidance visits to security-related organizations.

'bujang'euro" ["Kim Jong-un has become the chief of North Korea's secret police, the Ministry of State Security"], *Radio Free Asia*, December 31, 2009.

¹⁴ - He was replaced by Lee Myeong Su in April 2011 at the annual session of Supreme People's Assembly.

¹⁵ - Choe Seon Young, "Bug Inminboanbu geubgusang ... jumin bongyeog tongje 'sinhotan'" ["The sudden rise of the Ministry of People's Security ... Signal for increased repression of the people"], *Yonhap News*, April 6, 2010.

¹⁶ - Ju Seong Ha, "Gun-dang jeongbogwonryeog tonghaphan jeongchal chonggugeun Kim Jong-un jaggpum ... mwonga boyeojuryeo ganggyeongdobal" ["The General Reconnaissance Bureau unifies the information power of the military and the Party and was created under the initiative of Kim Jong-un to demonstrate his abilities through hard-line provocations"], *The Dong-A Ilbo*, April 22, 2010.

The enhanced importance of security and information organizations reflects that North Korea can no longer be effectively controlled through its Party organizations and its planned economy system as in the past.¹⁷ As the regime lost much of its capacity to penetrate and control the society and the elites through the Party organizations and the planned economy, it alternately strengthened its security and information organizations as well as its Penal Code. The security organizations were assigned the task of containing various potential sources of political instability such as popular dissatisfaction with ongoing policy failures, the increasing cultural penetration from the outside world including South Korea, the breakdown of social discipline due to an increase in illegal activities for the sake of livelihood as well as organizational crimes. The enhanced importance of security organizations also shows that Kim Jong-un's succession regime will have to maintain a high level of fear among the population to deter political resistance to its policies, which can hardly be popular with the people. In a nutshell, under Kim Jong-un's rein, the security organizations will play the pivotal role in crisis deterrence which the party has played in the past, and their importance will be recognized in the future.

The Party

Till the end of 1980s, the Party has been the core political instrument of the personal dictatorship of Kim Jong-il. The Party's most important function has been to provide political security by penetrating all entities of society and the state and by monitoring and controlling their political activities as well as the thoughts and behaviors of individuals. The

¹⁷- Park Hyeong Jung, "Bughaneseo 1990nyeongae Jeongchicheje byeonhwa" ["Changes in the political system since the 1990s in North Korea"], *Policy Studies*, Vol. 168 (Spring 2011), pp. 103-130.

changed environment since the 1990s made it impossible for the Party to continue its traditional political security function. Nowadays, the penal and public security functions of the security organizations are regarded as more effective than the political functions of the Party in deterring and managing social and political deviance. In addition, the policy formulation and implementation roles of the Party have significantly decreased due to the enhanced responsibilities of Defense Commission in this regard. What is worse, because the interests of the military are regarded as supreme, it is not easy for the Party to pursue a set of interests that run contrary to the wishes of the military.

It is true that a number of empty seats in major organizations of the Central Party were filled with new personnel at the Party Delegates' Conference in September 2009.¹⁸ It will be another story, however, to make them effective. This will require a serious restructuring of tasks and authority among the upper agencies of the party-state, a process which will encounter resistance from the military in general, especially the Defense Commission, the main beneficiary of the current structure. As long as internal and external conditions seemingly make it imperative to continue with 'military-first politics,' it will not be easy for the Central Party organizations to recover their previous reputation and effectiveness as the backbone of both the personal dictatorship and the nation.

The good news for the Party is that it is still capable of executing certain political functions which cannot be taken over by other organizations. The first such function is the political legitimization and ideological integration of the elites and the people. The Party will remain politically indispensable to Kim Jong-un because the succession cannot solely depend on coercion and fear. Therefore, the Party will still be useful to

¹⁸-Jinwook Choi and Meredith Shaw, "The Rise of Kim Jong-Eun and the Return of the Party," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol.19, No. 2, 2010, pp. 188-192.

him as an instrument for political propaganda and indoctrination. Second, the Party still has the capacity to articulate different policies and interests from those of the military and to be used to realize them. Even if the Party has lost its capacity to be a pivotal political actor, it still has greater potential in this regard than other organizations. In addition, relative to the security and military organizations, the Party has greater political sensitivity to the changing feelings of the population. The political problems stemming from the policy failures of the military-first political regime will have to be dealt with by the Party in the future. The membership of the Party, though weakened in its prestige, still maintains a corporate consciousness and demonstrates signs of participating in the roles and privileges of the ruling group. It is very important in North Korea to have political connections and protectors in order to gain better opportunities for commercial activities and enrichment through corruption and rent assignment.¹⁹ In this regard, the reward of Party membership still functions to co-opt individuals as regime loyalists. Fourth, the Party can still play its traditional role of monitoring and controlling the activities of the Party, state and mass organizations, which are still in operation. Also, as long as the state sector remains dominant in North Korea, the Party's traditional role of penetrating and controlling the former will remain essential to regime maintenance. In comparison, the security organizations will be mainly in charge of punishing and controlling deviance originating from increasing activities outside the state sector.

¹⁹-Choe Bong Dae, "1990nyeondaemal ihu dosi sajeog bumuneui sijanghwawa dosigagueui gyeongjejeog gyecheung bunhwa" ["The marketization of the private sector in the cities and the economic stratification of city households since the late 1990s"], *Current Studies in North Korea*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (August 2008), pp. 7-41.

Construction of Kim Jong-un's Personal Power Base

Kim Jong-un's methods for constructing a personal power base differ from his father's. Kim Jong-il built his personal power starting from the Central Party, especially the Department of Organization and Guidance and the Department of Propaganda. The expansion of his power fully destroyed the Party's autonomy and legitimacy and transformed it into a political security organization, which monitors and controls all individuals in all aspects of their works and lives.²⁰ Conversely, Kim Jong-un started from the military and security organizations. This difference in starting points reflects the changed conditions. Because the problems caused by policy failures and reduced legitimacy are much more serious in the son's period of advancement than in his father's, Kim Jong-un has to be more dependent on the coercive organizations of the military and security and transform them into pliant instruments in support of him. Whether the succession is successful depends on whether he can establish firm control over these two agencies. In this context, one of the most important tasks of his domestic policy will be to provide their organizations and operations with enough money and to protect the privileges of their agents.²¹ The hereditary succession to Kim Jong-un will remain stable if he can guarantee their loyalty and make them fully subservient to him. In this case, even if some challenges are posed by the population or the elites, his regime will be able to overcome them and ensure restabilization.

²⁰-Hyeon Seong Il, "Bugthaneui Nodongdang gyuyaggaejeonggwa 3dae seseub" ["The revision of Party Bylaws and the hereditary succession"], Seminar on the revision of the Party Bylaws and the hereditary succession held by Research Institute for Strategic Studies (February 7, 2011), pp. 19-20.

²¹-About Kim Jong-un's activities in this regard in 2010-2011, refer to Park Hyeong Jung, "Bugthaneui hugye chejew guchuggwa naebu jeongse (2010-2011)" ["North Korea's succession and internal situation (2010-2011)"], pp. 2-7.

On the other hand, Kim Jong-un should be provided with counter-mechanisms in case of their betrayal. These should make it impossible for the military to betray him or for him to be held hostage to the military and security organizations.²² First, for Kim Jong-un's personal safety, praetorian guards should be established with sufficient strength to match attacks by the regular army. Second, he should be personally put in charge of various security organizations inside and outside of the army and empowered with the authority to check up on the military and individual security organizations. Third, the military should be kept internally divided. Fourth, as a balance to the military and security organizations, the Party should be guaranteed a certain level of functionality and authority. In reality, the Party Delegates' Conference of September 2010 was held for this purpose. As mentioned above, though weakened, the Party still carries out essential functions of political security and political engineering which cannot be done by the military and security organizations. The problem is that the advancement of the military and security groups has shrunk the Party. The military-first political structure, however, can become a burden to Kim Jong-un, as it is associated with policy failures, the estrangement of the public, and security conflicts with neighboring countries. Kim Jong-un should maintain the higher profile of the Central Party organizations, avoid being captivated by the military's interests, and keep the civilian elites co-opted. If, at some time in the future, Kim Jong-un decides to take a policy course different from the military-first option, the need for political assistance from the Party organization will become much greater than it is now.

²² - Barbara Geddes, "How Autocrats Defend Themselves against Armed Rivals," Prepared for presentation at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, Toronto, 2009; Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 44-74.

Four Factors Influencing the Future of Hereditary Succession

Various factors can influence the process and ultimate result of the hereditary succession. Four factors will be mentioned here. The first is the external factor of whether North Korea can succeed in coercing neighboring countries to accept its strategic objectives or whether it should accept their demands. The other three are related to three internal structural developments in the future: the ruler's relations with state institutions, the ruler's relations with the elites in the society, and these three actors' relations with foreign powers.

Regime Survival and Hereditary Succession

As mentioned above, the launch of Kim Jong-un as successor coincided with a toughening of North Korea's internal and external policies. Since then North Korea has attempted to accomplish five strategic objectives to guarantee its survival as a "strong and prosperous country." The problem has been that their goals have been in contradiction with neighboring countries' wishes for denuclearization and reform in North Korea and they have been prone to increased external security tensions and internal economic stagnation. North Korea has stuck to its objectives anyhow, while proceeding with a gradual transfer of power to Kim Jong-un since the early 2009. The questions of whether North Korea can maintain its stability and whether the political succession can succeed both depend heavily on the getting positive results from tough internal and external policies which North Korea has taken since late 2008.

Two extreme cases can be imagined. One is a situation in which South Korea and the United States are coerced to fully accept North Korea's demands. In this case, Kim Jong-un's succession system would have the optimal environment and prosper without any major revision of

the current policy postures. The other extreme is North Korea's complete surrender to South Korean and American demands for denuclearization, reform and opening. This would mean that North Korea would have to shift to policy objectives in total contradiction with those now being pursued. Therefore, this scenario cannot be achieved without torpedoing the power transition to Kim Jong-un and the establishment of an alternative power structure in North Korea.

At some point of time in the future, North Korea could try for a negotiated compromise with South Korea and the United State especially with regard to denuclearization. The more favorable the outcome is to North Korea's regime, the greater the possibility that the political succession will be successful. The more favorable it is to South Korea's current positions, the lesser the possibility of a successful succession.

The Development of Ruler-State Relations

Ruler-state relations are related to the degree to which the patronage networks radiating from the ruler penetrate the state institutions - especially the military - and the dictator's success in wresting autonomy away from the state institutions and incumbents of those institutions who seek to retain autonomy.²³ As mentioned above, Kim Jong-un primarily took control of the military and security organizations, subsequently restored the organizations of the Central Party, and in general reemployed established elites. As long as he can maintain firm control over the military and security organizations, alienation against the hereditary succession will not become strong enough to threaten its success. Inevitably, it will be necessary to reshuffle the personnel and organizational structure in the

²³-Richard Snyder, "Paths out of Sultanistic Regimes: Combining Structural and Voluntarist Perspective," H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz (eds.), *Sultanistic Regimes* (Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 53.

process of the political succession to purge some of the established elites and promote new personnel. Nevertheless, open opposition will remain sporadic and ineffective, since the risks of joining in dissident behavior will remain high as long as the military and security continue to be tightly controlled by Kim Jong-un. Individual elites will calculate that it would be better to remain a cooperative part of the ruling group, even with reduced benefits, than to participate in a conspiracy to overthrow the regime and risk everything without an overwhelming probability of success.²⁴ If Kim Jong-un can successfully rein in the elites through above-mentioned mechanism, the regime will be unified under the dominance of the hard-liners and there will be little political space left open for soft-liners aspiring for independence from the dictator.

The Development of Ruler-Society Relations

North Korea's system depends on how well the patronage network penetrates civil society, co-opting societal elites through material rewards.²⁵ In the past, the Party organization and the planned economy played the essential role in penetration and co-optation, eliminating any noticeable opposition in North Korea. Since the 1990s, with the weakening of these two instruments, the regime has tried to strengthen coercive intervention through the military and various penal security mechanisms. Despite the regime's countermeasures, its patronage toward and control over society have seriously weakened since the 1990s. As a consequence, various conflicts between the regime and society will inevitably increase, though they will remain sporadic in the near future. Even worse for North Korea, human rights groups and other NGOs outside of North Korea

²⁴ - Barbara Geddes, *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 50.

²⁵ - Snyder, *ibid.*, p. 55.

could function as a sort of maximalist opposition which wishes to overthrow the regime. Despite the increased potential for conflict between the regime and society, in the foreseeable future discontent cannot be openly expressed and accidental clashes and disturbances, if they occur, will remain under the regime's control.

The important factor in the future development of ruler-society relations in North Korea will be regime's attitude and policy toward the market. Though the regime might not like the expansion of the market, it cannot deny reality. It would be better for the regime to accept the reality of the expanded market tacitly, if not formally, and attempt to penetrate and control it to its benefit. This could also open up opportunities to use the market to support regime survival, rather than be threatened by it. The regime's policy toward the market can be summarized in three points: the first is to guarantee the transfer of economic surpluses produced by the market to the state and its officials through state tax policies and coercion. The second is to co-opt the emerging merchants and entrepreneurs to form a power coalition to hinder the emergence of capitalists independent of state control. The third is to prevent the market from growing too strong through intermittent direct attacks and the establishment of obstacles to growth.²⁶

These policies have been relatively successful. The North Korean regime, its organizations and officials have financed themselves by taxing and exploiting market agents and directly participating in commercial activities.²⁷ It is not considered peculiar to see officials enriching themselves

²⁶- Similar examples can be found in Senegal and Cuba. Catherine Boone, "State building in the African countryside: Structure and politics at the grassroots," *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4. (1998), pp. 1-31; Javier Corrales, "The Gatekeeper State: Limited Economic Reforms and Regime Survival in Cuba, 1989-2002," *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 2004, pp. 35-65.

²⁷- Park Hyeong Jung, "Bughan 'Byeonhwa'eui jaepyeonggawa daebug jeongchaeg," pp. 23-124.

through corruption and securing privileged niches in the market. Anyone who wishes to be rich should carry out his or her private commercial activities as a public employee of a trading company run by an influential party-state agency and extract patronage from powerful organizations and/or officials through regular payments and/or bribes. The regime enforces various regulations to prevent markets from becoming too powerful and to keep them docile under its control. It has even tried to reinforce the 'planned system' and has carried out direct attacks on the market through currency exchange measures.

The Development of Foreign Power-Domestic Actor Relations

This category concerns the degree to which rulers or domestic actors are dependent on foreign patrons.²⁸ For now, China is Kim Jong-un's patron and South Korea and the United States are his foreign adversaries. Though there is no organized opposition to the regime inside North Korea, an increasing number of North Korean citizens are establishing contacts with maximalist opposition groups outside North Korea.

Up to now, the North Korean regime and China have established friendly relations of convenience while harboring mistrust.²⁹ North Korea's five strategic objectives, mentioned above, are not fully in harmony with Chinese interests. Nevertheless, China has supported North Korea, while accepting some negative expenses uncomplainingly due to worries about the uncertainty that may emanate from any change to the status quo. There are two situations China would like to avoid: the first is for North Korea to become unstable, and the second is for the North to improve relations with South Korea and the United States to the point that they

²⁸ - Snyder, *ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁹ - Michael D. Swaine, "China's North Korea Dilemma," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 30, Fall 2009.

supersede its relations with China. North Korea may be useful to China because its existence can divert the power of South Korea and the United States and thereby lessen their pressure on China.³⁰ For its part, North Korea depends on to China's patronage without a deep degree of trust because it lacks an alternative. Although North Korea asks for Chinese help, it rejects China's demands for reciprocity. Short of all-out war or a serious infringement on Chinese interests, China will remain relatively indifferent to North Korea's provocative foreign and security policies, because any attempt to interfere with them would seriously harm North Korea's leverage against South Korea and would doom the former in its relations with the latter. North Korea is prepared to accept Chinese support in its management of the domestic economy and politics, but it will reject or limit any constraints or influence China may attempt to exert. If North Korea must increase its economic dependence on China, it should be worried about the possibility that, at a critical moment, it may be pressured to accept what China wants. If North Korea's situation were to deteriorate to the level of the mid-1990s, it would have to crack down on dissidence with a similar degree of brutality as was shown during that period. If a foreign power were to restrain its will or capacity to crack down, the regime might arrive at a situation in which it must relinquish its power.

In addition, it should be noted that contacts between North Korean society and foreign patrons have been increasing.³¹ Various foreign groups have been trying to increase their contacts with people inside North Korea with various purposes: religious groups for missionary purposes; human rights groups seeking to improve the human rights

³⁰-Shen Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China," *China Security* (Autumn 2006), p. 20.

³¹-Mi Ae Taylor and Mark E. Manyin, "Non-Governmental Organizations' Activities in North Korea," Congressional Research Service, March 25, 2011.

situation in North Korea, etc. In addition, more and more North Koreans are being exposed to South Korean culture and information via commercial smuggling along the border, South Korean public and private broadcasting, and leaflets sent by NGOs. What can be said with confidence is that these kinds of activities will increase and improve their messages and organization in the future. In general these groups carry the maximalist goal of radically transforming the state and society as well as restructuring the nation's links with the international system, not limited to simply removing the dictator.³²

Conclusion: The Future of Political Succession

In the previous section, this paper discussed the four structural factors which will influence the future of political succession in North Korea. In the following, the different configurations of four political actors will be introduced. These four political actors will then be combined with the four structural factors discussed above to give a picture of the possible future trajectories of the ongoing hereditary succession in North Korea. Based on Richard Snyder's analysis of political changes in Sultanistic regimes, the four political actors are defined as regime soft-liner, regime hard-liner, moderate opposition and maximalist opposition.³³

The short- and mid-term will continue to see a configuration in which only two political actors interact: regime hard-liners predominate internally, while from the outside, fragmented and small maximalist oppositions continue to try to influence the political situation in North Korea. The regime hard-liners are unconditionally committed to perpetu-

³²-Snyder, *ibid.*, p. 52.

³³-*Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

ating the dictator's rule, while the maximalist opposition does not limit its goals to simply removing the dictator but seeks to overthrow the existing regime and seize control of the state.³⁴ The resulting political situation will be a continuation of stability or a restoration of stability after a crisis. Despite continued policy failures and deepening impoverishment, the space for regime soft-liners and societal opposition will continue to be very narrow and risky. As long as regime hard-liners maintain firm control over the military and security, internal challenges can be handled without much difficulty. Logically, more serious challenges could be imagined. For example, the long-enduring international isolation and sanctions brought on by North Korea's provocations could produce economic hardships comparable to those of the mid-1990s and increased political discontent, which could pose serious challenges to regime stability. In this case, the regime could still crush discontent with brutal force and restore stability. A similar situation has happened recently. The aftermath of the currency exchange measures in 2009 and 2010 resulted in such a case. These measures showed the classic combination of incompetency and irresponsibility implicit in an absolute personal dictatorship, and their negative impact on the economy and popular sentiment has been very serious. Nevertheless, the regime was able to overcome the crisis and restore stability because it could depend on the Ministry of People's Security and the Ministry of State Security, while there was no organized opposition.

At this juncture, let us assess the possible future emergence of the missing actors - the regime soft-liners and the maximalist and moderate oppositions. Let us first turn to the possibility of regime moderates and moderate opposition. Regime moderates perceive their survival to be separable from the dictator's and may come to view their association with

³⁴ - *Ibid.*, p. 51.

him as more of a liability than a benefit; the moderate opposition is committed to the limited goals of ousting the dictator and his ruling clique.³⁵ Usually the first choice of political alliance of the former is with the latter. Were it not for the widespread disguising of real preferences due to fear of repression, these two moderates groups could reflect the predominant sentiment of officials and the population in North Korea. According to an analysis of political tendencies in North Korea, there are three influential groups.³⁶ The first is made up of members of the ruling Kim family, the second is the Manju group consisting of the descendants of anti-Japanese guerillas, and the third group is the “new generation” made up of the family members and descendants of soldiers killed during the Korean War and those who gained meritorious distinction during the socialist construction afterward. The Manju group and the new generation have enjoyed a much higher level of freedom in market activities and exposure to foreign information due to their privileged political status. In reality, they have been the driving forces behind the market expansion which reached its peak in 2004. In this regard, they have been out of sync with the conservative trend of economic policy since 2005, which has disregarded the two groups’ wishes for market expansion. If this interpretation of groupings is correct, the Manju and new generation groups could be regarded as potential regime moderates and/or moderate opposition sources.

Let us now turn to the possible advent of maximalist opposition groups in North Korea. As mentioned above, maximalists do not consider it possible to reform the regime and instead desire to overthrow the regime and transform the country. The problem has been that in such a

³⁵ - *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁶ - Lee Gyu I, “Byeonhwahago issneun ‘jojigsaenghwal’ eui nara” [“The changing aspects of ‘organizational life’ in North Korea”], *Imjingang*, Vol. 9 (Fall 2010), pp. 128-131.

strong dictatorship as that of North Korea, where the regime maintains very strong security control over society, it has been altogether impossible for any such opposition to emerge, either moderate or maximalist. In North Korea's case, the only opposition to the regime comes from small and fragmented maximalist groups working outside the country, mainly in South Korea. These groups have been trying to influence the political situation in North Korea through increasing contacts with North Koreans and attempts to increase the information flowing into North Korea. Their influence will increase in the future and can be a significant factor in triggering political changes in North Korea.

Let us now turn to the problem of the types of political changes in North Korea, while taking into consideration the changing relations among the four actors mentioned above. In the short term, the most probable outcome is the continuation of regime stability or the restoration of stability after a crisis. This is most probable because the Kim family maintains firm control over the military and security organizations.

What about the possibility of a revolution? It may be elevated if the following conditions are met³⁷: 1) the ruler penetrates the state thoroughly, minimizing the possibility of an impetus for reform coming 'from above' (from within the regime itself); 2) in terms of ruler-society relations, the dictator's patronage circle of elites is narrow and his penetration into civil society is shallow; 3) the regime is economically and politically extremely dependent on foreign patrons. Revolution will be most probable when, at a moment of crisis in which moderates and maximalists are united, a foreign patron intervenes to restrain the regime from a brutal and bloody suppression of its opposition. This scenario may become possible in the future, but the probability seems rather low. It could be possible during a moment of mass revolt if the

³⁷-Snyder, *ibid.*, pp. 67-70.

regime hard-liners within the Kim family become so isolated that they are even estranged from the formerly loyal members of the Manju and 'new generation' groups, and if they are prevented from enforcing a brutal crack down on the opposition by intervention from their chief foreign patron, China.

What about the possibility of a military dictatorship or civilian rule following the Kim dynasty? For either of these scenarios to be realized, a revolt by the military must occur, rendering the regime hard-liners powerless.³⁸ Only thereafter would it become possible for a military dictatorship or civilian rule to be established. In order for such military moderates with the capacity for determined action to emerge, first the dominance of the regime hard-liners over the military must be slackened. In addition, while organized or coincidental revolts by society may threaten the hard-liners, dissident groups in the military have a legitimate right to exist and also have the opportunity for action.

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³⁸ - *Ibid.*, pp. 70-77.

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