

On The Threshold of Power, 2011/12 Pyongyang's Politics of Transition

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In 2010/11 Pyongyang has undergone several important changes which have adumbrated the politics of transition after Kim Jong-il. Within the regime, a series of incremental purges has taken place. A number of older cadres in the military and security institutions have fallen victim to substitution by members of Kim Jong-un's coterie of supporters. The symbolic regeneration of the party-state system has been overshadowed by the clamorous rise of a younger generation of hawkish generals in the military. The regime's self-proclaimed mission of constructing a "powerful and prosperous country" has turned sour. The poverty-stricken population has begun to harbor doubts about the future of the dynasty. The regime has applied such banal remedies as counter-mobilization and thought control. The regime's drive to achieve nuclear power status represents its last resort to maintain legitimacy as a state. The reshuffling of elites as part of the successor's pre-planned ascension has been accompanied by periodic intrusions by the new military into the jurisdictions of politics and diplomacy. An embellished transition without substantial reforms in dogged defense of the *ancien regime* epitomizes the outlook for 2012. Tactical reconciliation and military provocations will likely be employed by turns in order to overcome the potential resistance and instability following the death of Kim Jong-il and the atavistic third-generation hereditary succession.

Key Words: Kim Jong-un, politics of succession, elite reshuffling, new military, powerful and prosperous country

Introduction

With Kim Jong-il's death in late 2011, it is clear that 2012 will be a critical year for Kim Jong-un's succession process. This process was initiated in 2008 after Kim Jong-il's health suddenly deteriorated.

Kim Jong-il's sudden death put the succession plan to the test. The question on every North Korea watcher's mind is, can the Kim dynasty prove its tenacity once again without the omnipotent presence of Kim Jong-il? Thus the Kim regime has every reason to devote its full attention to proving its sustainability in 2012.

The Kim family regime employs numerology as a mystical bit of arcana to rally popular support for their regime. The year of 2012 marks the hundredth anniversary of dynastic founder Kim Il Sung's birth, the seventieth birthday of the former Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, and the thirtieth birthday of "crown prince" Kim Jong-un. In order to celebrate such historical milestones, North Korea has set out to a paramount mission for itself. It has already announced that it will debut as a "powerful and prosperous country" in 2012. Few people believe that North Korea can accomplish such a grandiose mission by 2012. In fact, North Korea recently signaled that this target will be postponed, stating that it will merely establish "the foundation" for the Powerful and Prosperous Nation in 2012 and then upgrade to the level of the advanced countries by 2020. Nevertheless, North Korea needs to promote a new vision to its people by holding political events next year. If these are successfully implemented, the regime will have partly demonstrated Kim Jong-un's ability to govern the nation even without Kim Jong-il.

What policies are expected to be employed for these purposes? Recently the regime has provided certain clues which allow us to chart its likely future course. In 2010-2011 Pyongyang undertook several meaningful changes which adumbrate the politics of transition in 2012. Inside the regime, a series of methodical purges have taken place. A significant number of old cadres in the military and security institutions have fallen victim to substitution by Kim Jong-un's coterie of cronies.

The symbolic regeneration of the party-state system demonstrated by the North Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Charter revisions was overshadowed by the clamorous rise of the younger generation of hawkish generals in the military. The regime's self-proclaimed mission of building a powerful and prosperous country has turned sour. The

postponement of the deadline for fulfillment to 2020 was a self-defeating measure. The poverty-stricken people have begun to harbor doubts about the future stability of the dynasty. In seeking to repress and control the growing discontent, the regime has applied such banal remedies as counter-mobilization and thought control. Desperate efforts are also being made to obtain foreign aid. As a last resort, the regime is struggling to maintain a *raison d'être* by achieving the status of "a nuclear power."¹ Meanwhile various processes are being pushed forward, including silent purges, reshuffling of elites for the successor's planned ascension, periodic intrusions by the new military into the political and diplomatic jurisdictions, and patching-up of the military-first ruling coalition. An embellished transition without any substantial reform to the *ancien régime* epitomizes the upcoming events for 2012.

The rest of this article discusses current issues and the regime's responses in an effort to chart the potential paths which North Korea may take after Kim Jong-il. The next section deals with the popular discontent related to the perpetuated problems of economic shortages and patrimonial corruption. The third section illustrates the ongoing process of the third-generation hereditary succession and elite reshuffling, examining personnel and institutional changes. It also elucidates the rise of the new military as well as the consolidation of the military-first ruling coalition. The conclusion offers a general forecast of the North Korean politics of transition and survival in 2012 and their implications.

1. The recent revelation of uranium enrichment facilities at the Yongbyon complex to Siegfried Hecker and his colleagues on November 12, 2010 demonstrated North Korea's resolve to become a nuclear state. See Siegfried S. Hecker, "A Return Trip to North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Complex," *Special Report* (Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, November 20, 2010).

Containing Discontent

Poverty Dangerously Perpetuated

An authoritarian regime can collapse from below or above. Thus all dictators try to keep popular discontent down to a manageable level in order to preempt challenges from below, which could lead to elite fragmentation and court conspiracies. The most important factor that can increase the popular discontent is economic hardship.² The North Korean regime has also learned well the lessons of failed dictatorships. The basic satisfaction of popular demands has been one of the key national goals in North Korea. The recent but belated emphasis on production of light-industrial goods and food effectively demonstrates the regime's anxiety.

The slogan of constructing a "powerful and prosperous country" first appeared in 1998, when Kim Jong-il officially inherited political power four years after his father's death and the basic economic life of the people radically deteriorated. The status of a powerful and prosperous country is said to rest on four pillars: military, political, ideological, and economic strength. North Korea claims that it has already achieved its goals in the military, ideological, and political arenas, and economic strength is the last hurdle it needs to clear. The regime clearly recognizes that its chief problem is its economy. The struggle to construct a rich country seems to have failed to achieve its purported goals. Poverty has continued to diminish popular support. All the relevant and available economic indexes ominously show that the pattern of underdevelopment (or mis-development) has become routine. As Table 1 illustrates, the North Korean growth rate and per capita GNI have fluctuated. The growth rate has been too low. Thanks to steady increases in trade with and/or hidden assistance from China, North Korea's total trade volume has steadily increased, causing the balance of trade to further deteriorate. In

2. See Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Table 1. North Korean Growth Rate and Per Capita GNI, 2000-2009

(Unit: %, Current U.S.\$)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Growth Rate	0.4	3.7	1.2	1.8	2.1	3.8	-1.0	-1.2	3.1	-0.9
Per Capita GNI	757	706	762	818	914	1,056	1,108	1,152	1,065	960

Source: Bank of Korea Economic Statistics System, <http://ecos.bok.or.kr> as of October 30, 2011.

Table 2. North Korean Trade, 2000-2010

	North Korean Trade				North Korea-China Trade			
	Total	Export	Import	Balance	Total	Export	Import	Balance
2000	2,395	709	1,686	-977	488	37	451	-414
2001	2,673	826	1,847	-1,021	738	167	571	-404
2002	2,902	1,008	1,894	-886	738	271	467	-196
2003	3,115	1,066	2,049	-983	1,023	395	628	-233
2004	3,554	1,278	2,276	-998	1,386	586	800	-214
2005	4,056	1,339	2,719	-1,380	1,580	499	1,081	-582
2006	4,346	1,467	2,879	-1,412	1,700	468	1,232	-764
2007	4,731	1,683	3,048	-1,365	1,974	582	1,392	-810
2008	5,635	2,062	3,573	-1,511	2,787	754	2,033	-1,279
2009	5,092	1,997	3,095	-1,098	2,681	793	1,888	-1,095
2010	6,085	2,557	3,528	-971	3,466	1,188	2,278	-1,090

Source: KOTRA, "Trends of North Korea's Foreign Trade," compiled annually.

addition, the recent increase in coal exports could reduce domestic production of electricity in the near future. While most relevant data on the North Korean economy for 2010-2011 has not yet been compiled, it appears unlikely that such trends will prove to have been reversed in 2010-2011.

Among economic factors, grain production may be the most politically significant because it directly impacts on the welfare of the North Korean people, who have suffered from a series of famines. As shown in Table 3, the total demand for grain crops has increased incrementally since 1998, when the food crisis was at its

Table 3. North Korean Grain Balance Sheet, 1995-2010

(Unit: 10,000 tons)

Year	Total Demand	Total Production in the Previous Year	Deficit
1995	534	413	121
1996	529	345	184
1997	530	369	161
1998	495	349	146
1999	504	389	115
2000	518	422	96
2001	524	359	165
2002	536	395	141
2003	542	413	129
2004	548	425	123
2005	545	431	114
2006	560	454	106
2007	543	448	95
2008	540	401	139
2009	548	431	117
2010	460-540	411	50-130

* Estimated demand based on reductions of normal daily food rations [546g per capita for adults].

Source: Ministry of Unification, *2011 Understanding North Korea*, 2011, p. 156.

peak.³ The size of the population has grown slightly. However, the pattern of the North Korean grain supply has been irregular. North Korea has been unable to restore its grain production to pre-crisis levels. Put simply, it has been unable to keep up with population growth. In 1995, 1.21 million tons of grain needed to be imported. In 2010, they still required 0.5 to 1.30 million tons of imports. The amount of grain imported by purchase or through foreign aid has

3. Regarding the causes, results, and problems in the aid implementation processes of the great North Korean Famine, see Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine: Famine, Politics, and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001); and Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Tao Wang, "Famine in North Korea: Causes and Cures," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (July 2001), pp. 741-767.

Table 4. North Korean Grain Balance Sheet, 2010/11

(Unit: 10,000 tons)

	First Estimate (November 16, 2010)	Revised Estimates (March 24, 2011)
Total Demand	535	534
2010/2011 Production	448	425
Deficit	87	109
Imported	32.5	20.0
Absolute Deficit	54	89

Source: KDI, "Estimates on Food Situations in North Korea," *KDI Review of the North Korean Economy* (May 2011), p. 80.

oscillated irregularly. The growing trade and exchange deficits suggest that North Korea is unable to produce or purchase a sufficient quantity of grains. In general, North Korea has been dependent on aid to compensate for its grain shortage.

This situation has not improved. In 2011, the food shortage appeared to grow more severe. Table 4 shows estimates of grain demand and supply in 2011. While about 1.09 million tons in imports were needed, only 0.2 million tons were actually imported. As a Congressional Research Service report pointed out, even though "the worst of North Korea's economic crisis reached in the mid-1990s seems to have passed ... the economy is still struggling and heavily dependent on foreign assistance to stave off starvation among a sizable proportion of its people."⁴

State failure has further worsened the economic predicament. First, economic hardships of normal citizens have grown worse since the currency reform of 2009.⁵ Food prices in the markets have been fluctuating with the unstable exchange rates. In the spring of 2010, the rice price was around 500 won per kilogram; one year

4. Dick K. Nanto and Emma Chanlett-Avery, "The North Korean Economy: Leverage and Policy Analysis," *CRS Report for Congress*, RL32493 (Congressional Research Service, Updated August 26, 2008), p. 5.

5. See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "The Winter of Their Discontents: Pyongyang Attacks the Market," *PIIE PB 10-1*, January 2010.

later, it had reached about 2,000 won. The stabilization of the market has been promoted as a major goal, but the regime has failed to control prices due to the total lack of trust in governmental policies. Second, predatory practices⁶ have weakened the already ramshackle household economy. Not only the people but the state itself has grown poorer. The “poverty of the state [and] the prospects of wealth from predation ... increased the likelihood that states would fail and political order break down.”⁷

In order to meet the government’s needs, the state has periodically expropriated food. Further, patrimonialized officials have not hesitated to steal food and other necessities from the state’s coffers as well as the people. Since regular remuneration ceased in the late 1990s, cadres and officials have had to depend upon corrupt practices to survive. The failed state and the elite who operate it have turned predatory for survival.⁸ With increasing popular discontent, North Korea’s current economic situation provides unfavorable conditions for the maintenance of the regime. The predatory practices bred within the rent-seeking regime and the accumulated state failures have further hardened the resentment of people. Without massive foreign aid (which has been hard to come by since the Yeonpyeong and Cheonan provocations brought adamant international sanctions)⁹

6. In the predatory state, the private rent-seeking interests prosper at the expense of public good through the state ruling mechanisms. See Ziya Onis, “The Logic of Developmental State,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (October 1991).

7. Robert H. Bates, “Probing the Sources of Political Order,” in Stathis N. Kalyvas, Ian Shapiro, and Tarek Masoud (eds.), *Order, Conflict, and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 40.

8. A failed (failing) state cannot ‘provide’ methods of delivering ‘public (political) goods’ to persons living within the designated parameters (national borders) in an institutionally governed manner. See Robert I. Rotberg, “Failed States, Collapsed States, Weak States: Causes and Indicators,” in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (World Peace Foundation/Brookings Institution, 2003), pp. 1-25.

9. Besides existing U.N. resolution 1695, 1718, 1874 and administrative order 13382 on the suspension of WMD-related trade, the U.S. is trying to impose additional financial sanctions on North Korea after the Cheonan Incident.

or radical domestic reform measures (which are anathema to the monopolizing rent-seeking classes¹⁰ who buttress the impending hereditary succession), such popular resentment and discontent can be contained only through the application of organized violence.

Counter-Mobilization

North Korea is in the process of leadership transition to its third-generation successor, Kim Jong-un, whose grip on power is vulnerable to unstable elements and defections from within and outside of the regime. At this critical juncture, a high level of popular discontent is very dangerous. The infectious nature of the Jasmine Revolution and the popular revolts in the Middle East has made the North Korean elites more alert.

In order to reduce popular resentment and maintain discipline among the security agents that have been assigned to control and monitor it, the regime needed some salient scapegoats. Consequently, some prominent senior politicians and officials were purged this year. Park Nam-ki (former director of the Central Party's Planning and Finance Department) was executed for the failure of the currency reform. Ju Sang-sung (Politburo member, National Defense Commission [NDC] member, director of the People's Security Department) and Lee Myung-soo (director of the NDC Administration Department) were dismissed and purged. Ryu Kyung, the first deputy director of the State Security Agency, was also executed. As discussed later, such purges also contributed to process of elite reshuffling.

However, popular discontent may not be fatal, provided that it cannot be properly mobilized. First of all, the vicious "yellow wind" of foreign cultural and capitalist influences must be kept out. In an

10. North Korea's abhorrence of reform and opening was succinctly expressed in an address delivered by Kim Jong-il in 1999: "Reform and opening is the surest way to national ruin. We cannot allow reform and national opening in the very least. Our powerful and prosperous nation means the powerful and prosperous nation of self-help by and for ourselves." Kim Jong-il, *Selected Works*, Vol. 14 (Pyongyang: Korean Workers' Party Press, 2000), p. 454.

effort to block the intrusion of exterior information and so-called “imperialist cultural conspiracies,” state censorship and thought control have been reinforced. Secondly, the social spaces for collective action and resistance must be preempted. The main target of this effort has been the youth and students, thought to have the potential to carry out collective resistance. For this reason, a series of state-led counter-mobilization campaigns such as the “Military-first General Youth Mobilization Rally” or the “Oath Pledging Parade of the Youth Vanguarders” have been held in the capital and the provinces.

In the latter cases, it is notable that officials connected with the youth movement such as Jang Sung-Taek (Kim Jong-il’s brother-in-law, Politburo candidate member, Central Military Committee [CMC] member, NDC vice chair) have been very active. Jang’s youth movement connection was formed when he was the director (1989-1995) of the KWP Youth and the Three Great Revolutions Small Team (TRT) movement. Prominent confidants of Jang include Choe Ryong-hae (close friend of Jang, Central Party secretary, CMC member, former general secretary of the North Hwanghae Province Party Committee); Kim Pyong-hae (Politburo candidate member, Central Party secretary); and Moon Kyong-duk (Central Party Secretary, Politburo candidate member, general secretary of the Pyongyang City Party Committee). Moon supposedly worked with Jang when he was the director of the KWP Youth Movement and Moon was a vice chairman of Central Committee in the League of Socialist Working Youth (LSWY).

Under current conditions¹¹ the voluntary coordination and political mobilization of the subjugated classes appear to be a remote fantasy, but with the addition of fractures among the elites, this latent explosive force may become a real threat. Or, the exact opposite may happen: after Kim Jong-il’s death, if fractures among the elites and mass disobedience become serious threats, the top

11. See Marcus Noland, “North Korea: The Tyranny of Deprivation,” in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Worst of the Worst: Dealing With Repressive and Rogue Nations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2007), p. 102.

leadership may attempt to break through the crisis by instigating a *juche* fundamentalist mass struggle in the style of a “cultural revolution,” culminating in large-scale purges of members of the old guard who display passively disobedient tendencies. We need to focus on the recent activities of personnel connected with Jang’s youth movement as potential leaders of a retroactive mass movement build through the mobilization of young fanatics.

Twilight of the Idols

Institutional Changes and Elite Reshuffling

North Korea made these institutional changes so as to concentrate political power more heavily in the chairman of the NDC and the chairman of the KWP’s Central Military Committee. When North Korea amended its Constitution in April 2009, it greatly enhanced the role and status of the chairman of the National Defense Commission. The chairman is now “the supreme leader” of the DPRK and “the supreme commander” of the DPRK’s general military; he also acts as head of state in the capacity of signing treaties with foreign countries or declaring a state emergency.

More importantly, at the KWP Delegates’ Conference on September 28, 2010, the North Korean regime formalized the Kim Jong-un succession system. The regime has gone public with its plans for the succession, based on blood ties of another supreme leader to follow in the “footsteps”¹² of Kim Jong-il. Also, this conference saw the

12. In a eulogistic hymn for the successor, *Footsteps*, Kim Jong-un is designated as Respectful Comrade Young General Kim. In a pamphlet entitled ‘*Educational References about the Greatness of Comrade General Kim Jong-un*,’ which was mass-distributed in June 2009 to propagandize for the succession plan to North Korean ordinary people, the song is called the “21st Century *Suryong* Hymn,” p. 6. Also, refer to B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves – And Why It Matters* (Brooklyn: Melville-House, 2010), pp. 126-127.

Table 5. Major Features of the Revised Party Charter

<p>Systematizing one-man rule and songun politics; giving the Mangyongdae dynasty personal ownership of the Party</p>	<p>“The Korean Worker’s Party is the Party of Great Leader Kim Il Sung.” (Introduction) “Prosperous development of Kim Il Sung’s Korea” (Introduction) “Centered on the Great Leader Kim Jong-il” (Introduction) “Mentions of “Kim Jong-il” (Introduction: 4, main text: 1) “Preserve the solitary leadership and ideology within the Party” (Introduction)</p>
<p>Legitimizing the familial succession</p>	<p>“The Great Leader Kim Jong-il will defend the ideology of the Party’s construction and the achievements of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung, and will brilliantly develop the power succession.” (Introduction) “Protect the succession of the Party’s construction” (Introduction) “The KWP is... a party of revolutionaries... pioneered by Comrade Kim Il Sung and guided by Comrade Kim Jong-il.” (Article 1) “True to the Mt. Baekdu tradition” (Article 60)</p>
<p>Changes to the power structure</p>	<p>“The Party Congress is the highest leading organ of the Party” and as such will “appoint the general secretary of the Korean Worker’s Party.” (Article 21) “The general secretary is the head of the Party” and as such will “represent and lead the entire Party.” (Article 22) “The general secretary of the KWP is the chairman of the Party’s Central Military Committee.” (Article 22) “The Central Military Committee will organize and guide all military affairs for the Party.” (Article 27)</p>

first revisions to the Party Charter in 30 years – since the 6th Party Congress in 1980.¹³ As illustrated in Table 5, the revised charter shows a marked trend toward a more personalist and hereditary Party structure.

Changes to the Charter and other laws are seldom regarded as important in North Korea because of the regime's one-man dictatorship system. North Korea is not a nation managed by laws; it is managed by the will of the leader and inter-personal relationships, which are the definitive factors that determine the actions of the political system's participants, and particularly members of the inner circle.¹⁴ In such a patrimonial one-man dictatorship, laws and regulations only effectively function as tools to legitimize the leadership.¹⁵ The revisions to the Constitution in 2009 and the Party Charter in 2010 both had a strong character of ex-post facto legitimization. North Korea is the kind of country where there is little resistance or doubt, even if the Party has not always been operated in a manner consistent with the organizational philosophy and procedures laid out in the existing Charter over the last 30 years.

However we can identify an undeniable connection between the emerging succession system and the Party Charter revision. In

13. The 1980 Guidelines are printed in the appendix of Choi Jinwook, *Modern North Korean Administration* (2nd Edition) (Seoul: Myeongin Publishing, 2008), pp. 349-394.

14. Kim Jong-il even argues that “[w]e must understand that and believe that the leader is the center of life of the socio-political community and it is only when we are linked to the leader organizationally, ideologically, and as comrades can [sic] we acquire immortal socio-political integrity.” Kim Jong-il, *On Carrying Forward the Juche Idea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1995), pp. 156-157.

15. “In patrimonial political systems, an individual rules by dint of personal prestige and power; ordinary folk are treated as extensions of the “big man’s” household, with no rights and/or privileges other than those bestowed by the ruler. Authority is entirely personalized, shaped by the ruler’s preferences rather than any codified system of laws.” Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 61.

1980 Kim Jong-il consolidated his status as a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and the Central Committee and as vice chairman of the Central Military Commission.¹⁶ In 2010 Kim Jong-un emerged as the acknowledged successor by becoming a member of the Central Committee and a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. Through the September 28th Party Delegates' Conference North Korea effectively completed the organizational repairs needed to launch the succession system by revising the Party Charter. These institutional changes mean little for Kim Jong-il, since he monopolizes all power regardless of his titles. However, it implies that Kim Jong-un will not share political power with others in the post-Kim Jong-il era.

The regime seems to have attempted to elevate the functionality and status of the Party in symbolic terms.¹⁷ This reveals the intent to normalize the 3rd generation succession structure through the Party organization ("The Workers' Party is the Party of Kim Il Sung") and to keep the bloated military leadership and elderly high-level officials in check. The Party may work to prevent divisions from forming among the power elites by increasing consensus through systematic distribution of power, and promoting a new group of elites in order to co-opt a portion of the potential opposition. This partial and symbolic rehabilitation of Party functions can be seen as a tool to prepare for stabilization during the post-Kim Jong-il transition period. Further, it appears to be an attempt to restore an official facade of legitimacy to the unofficial, familial leadership structure by making a symbolic gesture of returning to a formal-legal impersonalized form of governance based on the bureaucratic institutions of the Party. However, because the regime is trying to maintain the basic framework of ultimate power succession and patrimonial rule, any political reforms will be

16. For the Kim Jong-il succession processes, see Kongdan Oh, *Leadership Change in North Korean Politics: The Succession to Kim Il Sung* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1988).

17. See 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 (December 2010), pp. 175-201.

limited.¹⁸ In this respect, any predictions of a complete restoration of the Party-State system or a return to a normal socialist state system are of dubious credibility.

The partial rise of the Party's status is not so much a restoration of the Party-State system as it is a stopgap measure to compensate for the limits of one-man rule and support the implementation of the succession structure. Further, as it was impossible from the outset to expect Kim Jong-un to hold the same degree of status and power as his father, this can also be seen as a move to temporarily revive the role of the Party as the advance guard of the supreme leader in order to relieve some of the burdens on Kim Jong-un. However, it can also be interpreted as a move by the core group of supporters, led by Jang Sung-Taek, Ri Young-ho, and Kim Kyong-hui, to spread their influence through the Party organizations.

These institutional and political changes were intended to prevent any organization or individual from challenging Kim Jong-un's ascent to the throne. Despite Kim Jong-un's solid position as the young successor, the regime remains very cautious to assign any real power to him. It is very unlikely that Kim Jong-un will take over any of Kim Jong-il's positions immediately, with the possible exception of the position of supreme commander of the KPA. However, Kim Jong-un may assume greater importance by becoming first vice chairman of the NDC and a Politburo member in 2012. This measure can be employed to show off the robustness of Kim Jong-un's position after Kim Jong-il's death to the domestic and international audiences.

By reshuffling the Party organizations in September 2010, Kim Jong-il created a group of loyal supporters to back up Kim Jong-un's succession process in 2010-2011. This core group includes family members and friends such as Kim Jong-il's sister Kim Kyong-hui, his brother-in-law Jang Sung-Taek, chief of staff Ri Young-ho, and

18. For detailed information on the correlation between the durability of authoritarian systems and the systematization of the general functions of the ruling party, refer to Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 16-43.

old friend Choi Ryong-hae. These powerful individuals gained seats on the Politburo, which is the highest decision-making body in the socialist system, and they are ready to step in to fill the vacuum of power after Kim Jong-il is gone. This group of loyal supporters began to rise around 2005, when North Korea reverted away from its earlier “reform experiments” to tighten social control.

This was followed by a big power shift from the old coalition, centered around prime minister Park Bong-ju’s Cabinet and supported by the Old Military, to a new group of conservative party elites and the New Military, as Kim Jong-un began to rise to power. Elite reshuffling and hidden purges ensued. The old coalition fell apart, when Kim Jong-il withdrew his support. Some senior cadres have died in mysterious accidents or been stricken by sudden illnesses, some have been dismissed due to old age, and some have been executed for corruption. First Vice Director of Organization and Guidance Lee Jeh-gang died in a mysterious car accident in 2009; another vice secretary of the same department, Lee Yong-chul, died of a heart attack; the first vice minister of the People’s Armed Forces, Kim Il-chul, was disgracefully dismissed from all his posts reportedly due to old age; Ryu Kyung, the director of the State Security Agency, was executed; Park Nam-ki, KWP secretary for Finance and Planning, was executed for the failure of the currency reform; Ju Sang-sung, chief of the People’s Security Agency, was dismissed early this year for his mishandling of social control; Kim Young-chun, minister of the People’s Armed Forces, and Oh Kuk-ryul, vice chairman of the NDC, were sidelined. Others have rapidly ascended to more powerful roles as Kim Jong-un has risen to power.

It is likely that this elite reshuffling and the rise of a younger generation leaders will continue in a more and less silent manner in 2012. Although this gradual purge is being implemented in careful increments, as though on an installment plan, the possibility of unexpected revolts cannot entirely be excluded. Kim Jong-un has every reason to be cautious in implementing the elite reshuffling process at least until he can secure his position as the supreme leader.

The New Military

The recent advent of the New Military is the most dramatic new development. The main figures of the New Military include Chief of Staff Ri Young-ho, First Vice Director General Kim Jong-gak, and Director General Kim Young-chul. The rise of members of the so-called “new military leadership” has been accompanied by the relative decline of the old military group dominated by Oh Kuk-ryul and Kim Il-chol. This move has a strong character of a preventative measure against any possible resistance by members of the old guard in response to the organizational shift to the Kim Jong-un succession system.

Table 6. Major Generals in the New Military

Ri Young-ho (Jang’s classmate at the Mankyungdae Red-Flag Academy, KPA General Chief of Staff, Politburo Standing Committee member, CMC vice chair, KPA *chasu*), **Kim Jong-gak** (1st vice director of the KPA General Political Bureau, 4-star general), **Choi Bu Il** (KPA Vice Chief of General Staff, 4-star general), **Kim Myung-guk** (Chief of the General Staff Operations Bureau, CMC member), **Jung Myong-do** (Navy General Commander, 4-star admiral), **Hyun Yong-chul** (8th Army Commander), **Kim Young-chul** (Director of the KWP Reconnaissance Bureau), **Oh Il-jong** (newly promoted to director of the KWP Military Department, CC member, son of Oh Jin-woo, former KPA general chief of staff), etc.

The rise of the New Military seems to be closely related to the efforts to shape Kim Jong-un’s image as a military leader. He was promoted to KPA general one day before he was made vice chairman of the KWP’s Central Military Committee at the Third Party Conference. North Korea’s official propaganda machine describes him as a genius in artillery and military strategy, and he is said to have been the mastermind behind the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. He is often referred to as General Kim or the Young General. A military parade was held on September 9, 2011 on the 63rd anniversary of founding of the DPRK; this was likely part of the effort to raise the younger Kim’s profile as a military leader.¹⁹ It also is very suggestive

19. A military parade is held every five years; the last parade was in 2008.

that Kim Myung-guk, Jung Myong-do, Kim Kyok-sik,²⁰ and Kim Young-chul, who are all allegedly associated with the Cheonan incident, have been promoted as part of the recent generational shift.²¹

It is very likely that substantial leadership authority will be conferred on Kim Jong-un in the year 2012. A Party Congress is also anticipated in order to perform Kim's formal coronation. To embellish the reputation of the new leadership in such a short period of time, there seems to be no feasible option but to become a nuclear state or to make a show of strong military power. The succession government may proceed further into military adventurism. As they have already shown in 2010 and 2011, the emerging hawkish generals who form the armed vanguards of the young successor will willingly pursue policies such as military provocations and nuclear weapons development to consolidate their supremacy. The sinking of the Cheonan naval ship²² in March 2010 and the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island²³ the

20. In early 2009, Kim Kyok-sik was formally demoted from the highest position of the KPA General Chief of Staff to a field position as the 4th Army Commander in charge of defending the Southern Hwanghae Province and the maritime borderline (Northern Limit Line of South Korea, NLL). Since his commission, North Korean military provocations have markedly increased in his region. This culminated in the Cheonan Incident and the recent Yeonpyeong Island artillery attack. He was likely assigned there to carry out special missions directly issued from North Korea's top leaders. Despite Kim Kyok-sik's *formal* demotion, it is highly likely that Kim Jong-il *informally* empowered him, which would be possible only with Kim Jong-il's personal and deep confidence in him. It must be remembered that North Korea is a patrimonial state *per se*. It has been recently reported that Kim was appointed the KPA Deputy Chief of Staff in late 2011.

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

22. See Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "The Implications of the Cheonan Sinking: A Security Studies Perspective," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (December 2010); and ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND), *Joint Investigation Report on the Attack against ROK Ship Cheonan* (Seoul: MND, 2010).

23. See Han Sung-Joo, "The Yeonpyeong Shelling: North Korean Calculations," Luncheon Speech at the Five University (Universities of Princeton, Peking,

following November were solid demonstrations of North Korea's hard-line policy. These acts may have been planned to consolidate the power elites and to lay a foundation for Kim's succession by empowering relatively young hardliners among Kim Jong-un's guardian cadres who are likely to regard external tensions as "windows of opportunity through which parochial interests can jump."²⁴

In order to maintain the unity and solidarity of the new elites, who form the core ruling structure of the regime, North Korea has no choice but to continue its nuclear development programs and periodically repeat military, or, at least, verbal provocations. Support from the military and secret service agencies that monopolize the means of violence and coercion is essential for regime survival, especially if the country becomes a failed state and the public becomes alienated from the regime.²⁵ Thus, it is highly likely that the young Kim will take a more aggressive and adventurous stance whenever he feels insecure about his supporting system,²⁶ which is highly dependent upon the power of armed praetorians.

Tokyo, Korea, and National University of Singapore) Workshop on "Asia-Pacific Order and U.S.-China Relations" (December 10, 2010), Beijing.

24. Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," in Michael E. Brown, Owen R. Cote Jr., Steven E. Miller (eds.), *New Global Dangers: Changing Dimensions of International Security* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 56.
25. Under Kim Jong-il, the KPA has become the paramount power institution placed at the forefront of all other party-state apparatuses. Regarding military-first politics and changes in party-military relations, see Sung-Chull Kim, *North Korea under Kim Jong-il: From Consolidation to System Dissonance* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), pp. 81-104.
26. Robert Kaplan, "Attack That May Signal a Pyongyang Implosion," *Financial Times*, November 23, 2010.

Conclusion

Cooperation or Provocation?

Desperately needing foreign assistance and reassurance to hold popular discontent in check, the transition government might occasionally make tactical gestures of reconciliation or adaptability.²⁷ For instance, at the U.S.-North Korea bilateral talks held in Geneva on October 24-25 to discuss the North Korean nuclear programs and a potential resumption of the Six-Party Talks, the North demanded an unconditional and rapid resumption of the Six-Party Talks as well as “mutual trust-building efforts,” a phrase which implies the resumption of aid and the start of a more long-term process leading to normalization of U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations and the signing of a peace treaty. In order to secure economic assistance and military reassurances, North Korea needs to restart the Six-Party Talks; so much so that it could accept most of the concrete “pre-steps”²⁸ demanded by the U.S., with the exception of suspension of the UEP program, which is to be its key bargaining chip at the resumed Six-Party Talks.

North Korea may also seek reinforced economic cooperation from China without adopting any comprehensive reform policies that might lead to the collapse of the regime. China is preoccupied with the “grim specter of the potential chaos”²⁹ that would follow such a collapse. However, these policies should be regarded as auxiliary instruments attached to an overall hard-line foreign policy. North

27. Regarding the North Korean strategic double-play between provocations and negotiations, see Narushige Michishita, “Playing the Same Game: North Korea’s Coercive Attempt at U.S. Reconciliation,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 2009), pp. 139-152.

28. However, the U.S. and South Korea cannot easily accede to North Korea’s demands. Both want to “avoid buying the same horse twice.”

29. Jennifer Lind, “The Once and Future Kim: Succession and Stasis in North Korea,” *Foreign Affairs Snapshot*, October 25, 2010, URL: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66870/by-jennifer-lind/the-once-and-future-kim>, accessed on December 3, 2010.

Korea seeks to exploit the geopolitical paradox in which it can obtain foreign assistance as long as it can convincingly show the capacity to produce tensions among major regional actors. The Sino-American rivalry which played out following the Cheonan incident allowed North Korea to secure certain Chinese material and diplomatic help.

North Korea needs to hold political festivals this year with sufficiently impressive pomp to celebrate Kim Jong-un's ability as the new leader. North Korea hopes that in doing so it can enhance regime stability and consolidate the ongoing power transition to Kim Jong-un. To achieve all of these objectives, North Korea needs to secure a sufficient food supply. The most serious problem that North Korea faces at present is the food shortage. Its total grain production in 2010, four million tons, is comparable to that of previous years. However, the situation is now complicated by various factors such as the widening gulf between the rich and poor, widespread corruption, and the difficulty of distributing food to the soldiers and workers mobilized for state construction projects. The primary goal of Kim Jong-il's visits to China and Russia before his death was to gain immediate economic aid, rather than forge an agreement on a long-term project.

The odds of seeing a military provocation from North Korea in the first half of 2012 are relatively low, since they will at that time be preoccupied with the regime's survival after the departure of the powerful tyrant, Kim Jong-il. Another concern for North Korea is the two significant elections scheduled to occur in South Korea this year: the National Assembly election in April and presidential election in December. North Korea may seek to raise tensions in order to create frictions among South Koreans over their North Korea policy. However, North Korea will likely avoid making any overt military provocations like the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in view of the negative impact such moves might have on the South Korean electorate.

Despite the numerous factors that ought to discourage North Korea from making military provocations, the increasing role of the military in the policy-making process leaves room for uncertainties in the future. As the New Military increasingly dominates the decision-

making process, North Korea's policies have often seemed unprofessional and unpredictable rather than well designed and orchestrated, and its internal and external policies overall have become more aggressive. The North Korean military also monopolizes the country's economic resources. For example, the military controls more than 80 percent of the businesses charged with obtaining foreign currency.

It is not the Department of the United Front but the military that plays the leading role in inter-Korean relations. The military tends to take domestic variables very seriously, while ignoring the variables within South Korea. For example, North Korea's military provocations in May 2010 may have enhanced the status of Kim Jong-un as military strategist and contributed to his rise to power, but they damaged the positions of those in South Korea who support an engagement policy including large-scale food aid. It is also difficult to understand North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile tests in 2009 in the face of the Obama administration's declaration of willingness to talk with Pyongyang without preconditions.

Longer-Term Implications

The familial-personal leadership structure uses a system of distributing power and benefits in exchange for loyalty and obedience. In the absence of spontaneous obedience and sacrifice based on ideological devotion and faith, the general transition to a patrimonial leadership system will inevitably require a dramatic increase in the expense of regime maintenance. In the immediate future it will be virtually impossible for the regime to afford these rising regime maintenance costs. This may have a harmful effect on the ongoing third-generation succession – so much so that a power struggle might break out over the redistribution of power and privileges. As the distribution of privileges is crucial to maintaining fidelity in a family-based system of personal rule, the regime will have to disburse various special favors and rights to the new elites and ruling organizations. However, with the limited resources available for distribution, this process is likely to provoke fierce conflicts among rival organizations and

factions.

This volatility is no absolute guarantee of the emergence of reformist forces at the top or revolutionary changes from the bottom. However, the decline in regime stability and the growing confusion make that possibility much greater. Owing to the Kim Jong-il's sudden death, the scramble for rights and privileges may expand downward from the top into a limitless competition in the absence of control or oversight. In the worst-case scenario, it is even possible that a series of coups and counter-coups may break out by turns.

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