

Kim Jong Un's First 500 Days: Consolidating Power and Clearing Political Space for National Revival*

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This article assesses the leadership changes in North Korea since Kim Jong Un assumed power after Kim Jong Il's death on December 17, 2011. The first part addresses three fundamental questions: who really governs the country, how stable is the current North Korean regime, and what lies over the horizon for the leadership transition? Part two analyzes key dynamics within the Kim family, including the rising influence of Kim Jong Un's uncle Jang Song Thaek and the emergence of Kim's wife, Ri Sol Ju as a factor in family politics, as well as the regime's efforts to preserve and modernize the Kim monarchy. The article will also discuss how the regime seeks to strengthen the socialist party-state, reinvigorate the party's central leadership institutions, tighten the party's control over mass public organizations, and watchfully manage the party's center-periphery relations. Part three analyzes the main drivers and direction behind Kim Jong Un's transformation of the legacy government he inherited from his father, focusing on his overhaul of the national security establishment and party-military relations, restructuring of the socio-economic team, and adjustment of the foreign policy team.

Key Words: North Korea, Kim Jong Un, leadership changes, policy adjustments, national revival

A Dynamically Stable Regime

A year and a half into Kim Jong Un's rule, the formal father-to-son succession is over. But the political transition from the Kim Jong Il-centered totalitarian one-man rule to a more complex authoritarian

* The research and analysis presented in this article are based solely on publicly available materials. The views presented here are my own, and do not reflect the official position of any government, departments, or agencies.

governing system — so far centered on the new leader — still continues. North Korean leadership politics has become as vibrant, hard to predict, and somewhat open-ended as it was during past political transitions in North Korea, especially in the late 1940s, early 1970s, and mid-1990s, leading some Western pundits to question the stability of the current regime.

Although the domestic political situation in Pyongyang is no longer static, I judge it to be dynamically stable and conducive to further develop into a more responsive and efficient government. Kim Jong Un and the forces behind him shattered the political status-quo inherited from his father in December 2011 with bold and speedy actions aimed at discarding the legacy-governing system, rejuvenating and revamping the country's national security establishment, restructuring its economic policy-making apparatus, re-adjusting the foreign policy team, and reshuffling local governance elites.

The political transition — still ongoing — has a lot of moving parts and is unfolding in fits and starts. Its key actors are not necessarily visible and their intentions are not always clear. It is still uncertain who will be left standing when the dust finally settles. Some personnel changes appear to be quite natural, especially where health and age offer helpful excuses. Others are unusual and even unprecedented, given the speed and manner with which they were reportedly implemented. Many personnel developments are the products of various players' jockeying for power. Personal loyalties command a special premium. Job performance and substantive knowledge rarely matter. Corruption is a double-edged sword; only those who have mastered it succeed.

In their totality, these frequent reshuffles create the appearance of increasing uncertainty, tension, uneasiness, lack of firm direction, cracks, and disunity. But, in my judgment, they have not yet reached a level to potentially threaten the regime's stability, because they have little impact on its perceived legitimacy or performance. They are not yet fueled by factionalism nor do they meet internal elite resistance. They do not spill over into the broader society and do not agitate the general public, which is generally not aware of what is

going on at the top. But, they have created a new category of political losers among the former senior party and military officials and have generated some obvious hurtful feelings and bad memories, which could serve as a potent source of potential opposition in the future.

After Kim Jong Il's death, many analysts expressed great confidence that in the next few years North Korea would be led by the same people who had been leading it over the previous decade.¹ They believed that Kim Jong Un's young age and inexperience would make it easier for the time-tested party apparatchiks and *Songun* (military-first)-accustomed generals to manipulate the young ruler, to influence his decisions, and to control his policies from behind the scenes. These predictions proved to be close to the mark on the family side, only partially correct on the party side, largely wrong on the government side, and absolutely wrong on the military side.

Who Governs?

In April 2012, North Korea unveiled a new governing system presided over by Kim Jong Un, the third generation *Mangyongdae* dynasty ruler who declared the commencement of the second century of the *Juche* revolution and the Kim family rule. Depending on our assumptions on the degree of his control over the party, state, and military, one can come up with competing explanations of what may have been driving the long-overdue overhaul of the governing system.

If one assumes that Kim Jong Un is in full control, the periodic personnel reshuffles may mean that the succession is over,² and that he has arrived as the country's supreme leader in his own right. Kim feels secure and comfortable enough to speed up generational change and dismantle the legacy government he inherited from his father. Hence, he is surrounding himself with the people he can trust, pushing

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1. Andrei Lankov, "It's not All Change in Pyongyang," *Asia Times Online*, January 5, 2012, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NA05Dg01.html>.
 2. "Kim Jong-un Named 1st Secretary of the Workers Party," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 12, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/04/12/2012041200959.html.

aside his father's confidants. According to Cheong Seong-Chang from the Seoul-based Sejong Institute, "from now on, the old guard who had supported Kim Jong Il will stay in the backseat or gradually retire."³

Supporting this hypothesis, out of the original seven senior officials who walked alongside the hearse carrying the body of Kim Jong Il during the final funeral procession on December 28, 2011 — the so-called Gang of Seven, portrayed by the conservative ROK media as the most trusted aides of Kim Jong Un^{4,5} — four have already lost power (State Security Department, SSD Director U Tong Chuk, former Chief of General Staff Ri Yong Ho, and 75-year old Defense Ministers Kim Yong Chun and Kim Chong Gak were dismissed)^{6,7} while two others — Party Secretaries 86-year old Kim Ki Nam and 83-year old Choe Tae Bok — failed to make it to the inner circle. Only one man from the original Gang of Seven — Kim Jong Un's uncle Jang Song Thaek (66) — was able to gain more power and increase his party rankings during the past year and a half.

The second hypothesis is that Kim Jong Un is only partially in control and that someone else may be calling the shots or manipulating him.⁸ In that case, last year's inauguration of a new national security team may indicate that those officials who gained power in the recent

3. "N. Korea names new defence minister before launch," *Agence France Press*, April 11, 2012, <http://www.mysinchew.com/node/72392>.

4. "The 'Gang of 7' Behind Kim Jong-un," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 29, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/12/29/2011122901522.html.

5. Andrew Salmon, "Power behind Kim Jong-un's throne: the 'Gang of Seven' emerges from the shadows," *The Telegraph*, December 31, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8986568/Power-behind-Kim-Jong-uns-throne-the-Gang-of-Seven-emerges-from-the-shadows.html>.

6. "N. Korea purged senior intelligence official," *The Korea Times*, April 17, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/04/113_109120.html.

7. "N. Korea names new defence minister before launch," *Agence France Press*, April 11, 2012, <http://www.mysinchew.com/node/72392>.

8. "Kim Jong-un's Aunt Seen as Power Behind the Throne," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 12, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/04/12/2012041201068.html.

reshuffles, including Jang Song Thaek and his longtime protégé Choe Ryong Hae,⁹ finally succeeded in dismantling the protections built into the successor support system by Kim Jong Il to prevent these potential rivals from staging a palace coup against his son. By gradually dismantling the guardianship system built by Kim Jong Il in the last two years of his life, Jang appears to have cleared the obstacles facing his own possible power takeover bid.

At the same time, I cannot exclude the possibility that the purged officials (U Tong Chuk, Ri Yong Ho, Kim Chong Gak, Chon Pyong Ho, and others) may have been accused of saying or doing something threatening Kim Jong Un's rule (disloyalty, arrogance and high-handedness, policy mistakes, coup plot, etc.). Kim's aunt and uncle may have convinced the young and easily impressionable ruler to remove them from power, which in turn, strengthened their own influence inside the palace.

One of Kim's new guardians once reportedly told Kim's uncle Jang, "If anyone were to stand in the way of Kim Jong Un, they would never be forgiven no matter who they were."¹⁰ Little did he know, and now he is gone, whereas Jang's power has grown unchecked.

The third hypothesis is that Kim Jong Un is a legacy figurehead leader symbolizing the continuity of regime and was elevated only temporarily for the sake of the preservation of internal political stability to preside over several elite groups competing for power and policy influence. If that is the case, then the ongoing personnel reshuffles may reflect the continued power rebalancing among competing groups of officials, especially between the party and the military, the military and security, the civilian economic bloc and defense industry, and the men in uniform.

The fourth possibility is that, in contrast to Kim Jong Il, whose

9. These officials were part of the original successor support group that was sidelined by Kim Jong Il after the Third Workers' Party Korea (WPK) Conference in September 2010.

10. Lee Young Hwa, "Cracks in Kim Jong Eun System," *Daily NK*, February 9, 2012, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk03600&num=8787>.

“unified guidance system” (i.e., one man rule) was based on the principle of “single-hearted unity,” and thus banning party factionalism, Kim Jong Un may have decided to base his governance on the principle of checks and balances between emerging rival intra-party groups. This style is more similar to his grandfather Kim Il Sung’s governing system, which relied on intra-party faction competition to consolidate and maintain his personal authority and improve the overall performance of the party establishment. Kim Jong Un reportedly seeks to mimic his grandfather’s public image and leadership style, according to the South Korean media.^{11, 12}

Based on my evaluation of Kim’s first year and a half in power, I judge that he reigns supreme. He proved to be a formidable opponent to be discounted only at one’s own peril. He has different ropes for different folks. He demonstrated swift ruthlessness in eliminating his potential enemies inside the royal palace and military barracks. The successful satellite launch on December 12, 2012, and the third nuclear test on February 12, 2013, further boosted Kim Jong Un’s domestic legitimacy, increased his political capital, undermined potential critics, helped him silence military discontent, and increased his international stature and bargaining power.

Looking Over the Horizon

Kim Jong Un’s overhaul of the legacy government will not be complete until he replaces the nominal head of state and puts his own confidant into this important post. Hence, senior state leaders — President of the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) Kim Yong Nam, 84, and SPA Chairman Choe Tae Pok, 82, and Vice-President of SPA Presidium Yang Hyong Sop, 87 — may be next in line for replacement, possibly

11. Kim Kyu-won, “Kim Jong-un speaks his father’s words with his grandpa’s face,” *Hankyoreh Sinmun*, April 16, 2012, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/528499.html.

12. “Kim Jong-un is out of mourning, out in public,” *JoongAng Ilbo*, February 6, 2012, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2947978&cloc=joongangdaily|home|newslist1>.

during the Eighth Session of the 12th SPA this fall or at the First Session of the 13th SPA in the coming year.

Who replaces Kim Yong Nam may tell us about the future direction of the restructuring of the political system. If Kim Yong Nam's replacement is someone like Kang Sok Ju (73) — a Politburo Member and Kim Jong Il's longtime confidant on foreign affairs, like Kim Yong Nam used to be prior to his elevation to the position of the nominal head of state — it will be a sign of regime continuity and a bit of evidence supporting the argument that Kim Jong Un, despite his growing political capital, is still beholden to the old elites and is not yet able or willing to fundamentally restructure the political system he inherited from his father. Appointment of Jang Song Thaek as the nominal head of state will be an indicator of Jang's rising political and foreign policy influence and his continued efforts to secure his grip on power beyond his wife Kim Kyong Hui. It will give more weight to the second hypothesis about Kim's power-sharing with the regime's heavyweights like Jang. If Kim Jong Un decides to assume the position himself, it will be an unexpected move, possibly indicating his ambition to eventually allow a popular election of the head of state to further boost his legitimacy so that he can become the first popularly elected president of the North sometime in the distant future (on par with the South Korean President). This course of action will be a good indicator that Kim is in full control because it will further concentrate power in his hands. Finally, the appointment of a dark horse would signal that the power of the President of the SPA Presidium may be downgraded or shifted to some other institution, perhaps to be created in the course of a possible constitutional reform in the future, especially if Kim Jong Un decides to rule like his grandfather did, relying on intra-party faction competition and re-establishing the institution of the presidency and its subordinate structures, similar to the now defunct central people's committee.

The Kim Family Reigns: Preserving the Monarchy and Strengthening the Party-State

Kim Jong Un Supreme

Since Kim Jong Il's death, the Kim family continues to rule North Korea for the seventh decade in a row. The system executed Kim Jong Il's October 8, 2011, will with little resistance from vested interest groups by promptly reaffirming Kim Jong Un as "the only successor to Kim Jong Il standing at the helm of the Korean revolution and the cause of *Juche* ideas"¹³ and as "the only center of unity, cohesion and leadership of the WPK and KPA,"¹⁴ thereby delegitimizing all other possible successors and contenders to the throne. On December 30, 2011, the Workers' Party Korea's (WPK) Central Committee (CC) Politburo appointed Kim Jong Un as the KPA Supreme Commander;¹⁵ the Fourth WPK representatives conference elected him as the First Secretary of WPK CC and Chairman of the WPK Central Military Commission (CMC) on April 11;¹⁶ the Fifth Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) elected him as First Chairman of DPRK National Defense Commission (NDC) two days later;¹⁷ and, finally, the WPK CC, CMC, NDC, and SPA Presidium awarded him the land's highest military title of Marshal in a rare joint decision on July 18,¹⁸ completing the ceremonious process of placing Kim Jong Un at the top of the North's party, state, and military hierarchies.

Defying pundits' expectations,¹⁹ Kim Jong Un secured the formal

13. Report on Meeting of Political Bureau of WPK Central Committee, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), December 31, 2011.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2012.

17. "Fifth Session of 12th SPA Held," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), April 13, 2012.

18. "Kim Jong Un Awarded Title of Marshal of DPRK," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), July 18, 2012.

19. Cho Jong Ik, "Kim Jong Un to Split Up Party-military to Secure Cadres," *Daily NK*, December 21, 2011.

trappings of power in just four months, in contrast to Kim Jong Il, who had mourned his father's death for three years before officially assuming the top leadership posts. On the one hand, such a rush to transfer power ensured that there would be no power vacuum at the top of the governing pyramid that could potentially upset the system's equilibrium, invite opportunists, and cause political instability. On the other hand, it prompted questions about the successor's filial piety and personal insecurities.

The Rise of Jang Song Thaek

At the time of Kim Jong Il's death, many North Korea watchers believed that Kim Jong Un's 66-year-old uncle Jang Song Thaek could emerge as a regent figure, exercising significant power at least during the new leader's early period in office.²⁰ These expectations proved to be correct: in less than a year, Jang emerged as the most dynamic and dominant power broker behind the throne,²¹ after systematically dismantling the successor support group put in place by Kim Jong Il before his death in 2011, and elevating a cohort of the party officials personally loyal to him to key power-wielding and policy-making positions.²²

Jang catapulted from the 19th place in the North's power hierarchy, as exemplified by his place in Kim Jong Il's state funeral committee membership list,²³ to the number four position right behind the remaining three WPK CC Politburo Standing Committee members

20. "Power Struggle Begins in N.Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 22, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/12/22/2011122200865.html.

21. "Jang Song Thaek and Choi Ryong Hae solidify their positions of power," *Hankyoreh Sinmun*, July 19, 2012, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/543297.html.

22. "Kim Jong Un's Uncle Gains Control of N.Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 30, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/07/30/2012073001542.html.

23. "National Funeral Committee Formed," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), December 19, 2011.

(Kim Jong Un, Kim Yong Nam, and Choe Ryong Hae) even ahead of his wife Kim Kyong Hui. This was evidenced by his fourth place in the official listing of the senior party, state, and military leaders who attended the military parade marking the 81st anniversary of the KPA's founding on April 25, 2013.²⁴

In a relentless drive to consolidate his power, Jang forced the surprise removal of four senior military officers from office. They had escorted Kim Jong Il's casket during his funeral in December 2011 and were widely assumed to be Kim Jong Un's guardians designated by his father to protect him from any possible rivals.²⁵ These were:

- Acting head of State Security Department (SSD) U Tong Chuk in March 2012;²⁶
- Defense minister Kim Yong Chun in April 2012;²⁷
- Chief of KPA General Staff Ri Yong Ho, formerly ranking 2nd place in the North's power hierarchy, in July 2012,²⁸ and
- Acting head of the KPA General Political Department (GPD) and later minister of defense Kim Jong Gak, in November 2012.²⁹

At the same time, Jang ensured the rapid promotion of the senior party

24. *Rodong Sinmun*, April 26, 2013.

25. "The 'Gang of 7' Behind Kim Jong Un," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 29, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/12/29/2011122901522.html.

26. "N. Korea purged senior intelligence official: source," *The Korea Times*, April 17, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/06/120_109120.html.

27. Choe Sang Hun, "Top North Korean Defense Official Replaced, South Korea Says," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/30/world/asia/top-north-korean-defense-official-replaced-seoul-says.html?_r=0.

28. "Ousted N.Korean Army Chief 'Defied Orders'," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 27, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/07/27/2012072700918.html.

29. Choe Sang Hun, "Top North Korean Defense Official Replaced, South Korea Says," *The New York Times*, November 29, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/30/world/asia/top-north-korean-defense-official-replaced-seoul-says.html?_r=0.

officials with whom he had worked together since his days at the Korean Socialist Youth League, including the new General Political Department Director Choe Ryong Hae, Pyongyang party boss Mun Kyong Dok, the party secretary responsible for South Korea Kim Yang Gon, his right-hand man at the WPK CC Administrative Department Ri Ryong Ha, director of WPK CC Mass Public Organizations Department Ri Yong Su, North Korea's Ambassador to China Ji Jae Ryong, and others. It remains to be seen whether these officials will stay loyal to Jang in the long run.

Despite Jang's steady rise in power and status, some skeptics still believe his ability to control the elites and the prospects for his grasp of absolute power are limited by the fact that he belongs to a different clan, albeit married into the Kim family.³⁰ They assert that Jang derives his power from his marriage to Kim Jong Il's younger sister Kim Kyong Hui, who is the reported official executor of his estate and last will. As a result, Jang's overwhelming influence as a power-brokering regent will last only as long as she is alive and well. But because her health is rumored to be deteriorating,³¹ these skeptics predict a rather short regency for Jang, too.³²

However, in my opinion, we should not underestimate Jang's ability to persist, given the fact that he outwitted and outlived those people who had purged him in the late 1970s, mid-1990s, and mid-2000s. I believe Jang is now busy removing his potential rivals and installing his loyalists to cement a power base of his own and make sure he will survive as one of the North's rulers even after his wife's departure from the political scene. It is clear that Jang has recently outgrown the narrow confines of his formal position as director of

30. Nick Miller, "Kim Kyong Hui's Health and the Fate of Jang Song Thaek," Korea Economic Institute, October 1, 2012, <http://blog.keia.org/2012/10/kim-kyong-huis-health-and-the-fate-of-jang-song-taek/>.

31. Kim Yong-Jin, "N. Korean leader's aunt in ill health," *The Korea Times*, September 7, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/09/116_119396.html.

32. "Who Runs North Korea?" *Chosun Ilbo*, December 18, 2012, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/12/18/2012121800673.html.

WPK CC Administrative Department and NDC vice-chairman, even though it gives him enormous policy-making and supervisory powers over a very important segment of the country's power bloc.

The WPK CC Politburo's decision on November 4, 2012, to form the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission headed by Jang to spearhead Kim Jong Un's new drive to build up the North as a sports power, endowed him with an institutional platform to encompass and guide all party, government, and military organizations, at the central and local levels beyond the power bloc institutions. While his nephew remains at the helm of the National Defense Commission, Jang set up his own all-nation supra-Cabinet Commission subordinating many key Politburo, CMC, NDC, and Cabinet members and leaders of mass public organizations to his control, who previously had not been under his supervision. In doing so, he covered all important political and socio-economic constituencies, significantly extending his power base. Jang may be scheming to create an autonomous center of power on the basis of the Sports Commission as an alternative to the NDC in the long run.

Enter Kim's Wife

Kim Jong Un's marriage in June 2012, less than six months after his father's death, introduced a new wild card into the North's ruling clan politics. The emergence of the non-traditional Ri Sol Ju factor modernizes and complicates the political landscape. The first lady could be both an asset and a liability. On the positive side, she can boost the regime's continuity and vitality by delivering the long-expected fourth generation successor. She can also act as a strong advocate of high-level attention to important social issues, especially women's concerns, and can offer a public relations bonanza to a regime seeking to present a softer, gentler, and a more human face for the Kim monarchy. On the negative side, her alternative opinions may foment cracks in the inner circle, undermining political stability, especially if the new leader truly listens to her. In any case, the unfortunate fates of Kim Il Sung's and Kim Jong Il's former wives are

worth keeping in mind.³³

Key unknowns are Ri's relationship with Kim Jong Un's other relatives and his close advisors, particularly with his powerful aunt Kim Kyong Hui and sisters Kim Yo Jung and Kim Sol Song. Also unknown is Ri's parents bearing on her position and influence. I have no information on these relationships but recognize that they may have significant impacts on the first lady's position in the leadership hierarchy and her status and influence within the Kim clan as well as in Kim Jong Un's household.

In bringing Ri forward, the regime may have been motivated by Kim Jong Un's desire to distinguish himself from his father and grandfather, to demonstrate that he is a more modern ruler, to ease the legitimization process for his future successor, and, possibly, to show a different normative construct for husband-wife relations in North Korea. But, after her brief initial introduction, the regime may have reverted back to the traditional way its propaganda machine has treated first ladies, engulfing them in a veil of secrecy. Alternatively, the regime may have decided to scale back Ri's public profile either to accommodate her pregnancy at the time^{34,35} or in an effort to adapt to the reported international and possibly internal criticisms of her appearance and activities, while still grappling with the challenge of defining her public image and acceptable roles.

33. Kim Il Sung, at Kim Jong Il's urging, moved his second wife Kim Song Ae off the political stage because of her efforts to diminish the role and image of Kim Jong Il's biological mother Kim Jong Suk, and thereby presumably undermine Kim Jong Il's succession and elevate her own children's prospects. Kim Jong Il reportedly separated from his first wife Kim Yong Suk and exiled his second unofficial wife Song Hye Rim to Moscow where she died from health problems in 2002.

34. "Ri Sol Ju in Black Funeral Attire" [*Gumeunsangbokipeu Ri SolJu*], *JoongAng Ilbo*, December 17, 2012, <http://joongang.joinsmsn.com/article/225/10191225.html?ctg=1000%20%20&cloc=joongang|home|newslst1>.

35. "Images suggest North Korea leader's wife pregnant," *Agence France-Presse*, December 17, 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1107108/images-suggest-north-korea-leaders-wife-pregnant>.

The Party Rules

North Korea under Kim Jong Un continues to be the socialist party-state with all key decision-making authorities (national, provincial, and local) concentrated in the WPK offices rebuilt at the third party representatives' conference in September 2010, and strengthened at the fourth party representatives conference held in April 2012.³⁶ To reinforce political control over the party establishment, Kim Jong Un used its machinery to pack the WPK supreme leadership bodies — the Politburo,³⁷ Secretariat,³⁸ Central Military Commission,³⁹ and Central Committee departments⁴⁰ — with his loyalists.

In the past year, Kim revived the old forgotten practice of using the party Politburo platform to legitimize changes in the supreme leadership and strategic choices impacting the nation's survival and core interests. He did it five times, which underlined the paramount importance of the decisions made there. Three Politburo meetings concerned the fate of number one and number two persons in the country: the December 30 Politburo's extraordinary meeting appointed

36. *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2012.

37. On January 1, 2012, the WPK CC Politburo had 27 members (3 standing committee members, 10 full members, and 14 alternate members). On April 11, 2012, the fourth party representatives' conference expanded the Politburo ranks to 34 (5, 15, 14, respectively). As of December 19, 2012, its membership apparently dropped back to 30 (4, 11, 15, respectively), losing those holdovers who failed to secure Kim's trust or demonstrate their value like Ri Yong Ho, Kim Rak Hui, Ri Thae Nam, and Pyon Yong Rip.

38. The WPK Secretariat stayed stable at ten members: last April, Kim Jong Il's sister Kim Kyong Hui replaced Choe Ryong Hae as the party secretary probably responsible for organizational affairs, and Kwak Pom Gi replaced Hong Sok Hyong as the party secretary in charge of economic policy, i.e. North Korea's equivalent of the economic policy czar.

39. The WPK Central Military Commission shrank from 19 last December to 16 a year later, which is expected given the high turnover of senior military officials.

40. The WPK CC department directors and their first deputies almost all remained in office and some even gained in political influence, especially department director Ri Yong Su and first vice-directors Han Kwang Sang, Ri Ryong Ha, and Ch'oe Hwi.

Kim as the KPA Supreme Commander;⁴¹ the July 15 extraordinary meeting removed number two strongman Ri Yong Ho from power;⁴² and the November 4 enlarged meeting appointed regent Jang Song Thaek as Chairman of Physical Culture and Sports Commission.⁴³ The fourth Politburo meeting held on January 23, 2013, approved important state measures to counter the punitive UN Security Council resolution 2087 in the aftermath of the North's satellite launch, whereas the fifth Politburo meeting held on February 11, 2013, probably gave the final green light to the DPRK's third nuclear test conducted the following day.

Control over Mass Public Organizations Unchallenged

The party's control over mass public organizations and their membership, which serve as "transmission belts" designed to spread the party ideology and influence across the North Korean society and to mobilize various social groups to implement party policy and appeals, remains unchallenged, despite some predictions of possible social unrest and breakdown of social controls in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death in December 2011.⁴⁴ Only one of the four leaders of mass public organizations — First Secretary of the Central Committee of Korean Socialist Youth League (KSYL) Ri Yong Chol- was replaced with Chon Yong Nam in March 2012.⁴⁵ That move probably reflected the party's growing concern over the so-called youth problem, the threat of the

41. "Communiqué on the Meeting of the Workers Party of Korea Central Committee Political Bureau," December 31, 2012, Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station via Satellite in Korean 2100 GMT, Dec 30, 2011 .

42. "Ri Yong Ho Relieved of All His Posts in DPRK," Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), July 16, 2012.

43. Report on Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of WPK Central Committee, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), November 4, 2012.

44. "Kim Jong Il's Death Kept Secret for 2 Days Over Fears of Civil Unrest," *Yomiuri Simbun*, December 26, 2012.

45. Kang Mi Jin, "KIS Youth League Gets New Head," *Daily NK*, March 23, 2012, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01700&num=9018>.

Western-led “ideological and cultural poisoning” of the young generation, its declining fervor in defense of the *Juche* ideas, and subsequent loosening of the party’s grip over the hearts and minds of the young successors to the Korean revolution.⁴⁶

The leadership of the other three organizations — General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea (GFTUK), Korean Democratic Women’s Union (KDWU), and Union of Agricultural Workers of Korea (UAWK) — was left unchanged for the time being. After successfully arranging a nationwide celebration of the maiden Mother’s Day in November 2012, the first new national holiday established by Kim Jong Un,⁴⁷ the KDWU leadership appears to have been able to overcome the bad memories held by the Kim family of its past disloyalty when the KDWU provided a platform for anti-Kim Jong Il’s activities conducted by his stepmother while Kim Il Sung was still alive.

No Major Change in Party Center-Periphery Relations

With the exception of Pyongyang city politics, the new regime managed party center-periphery relations without any major innovation over the past year and a half. Noteworthy is the replacement of two out of three Pyongyang city leaders, which probably reflects the efforts of Pyongyang city party boss Mun Kyong Dok, one of Jang Song Thaek’s long-time loyalists, to help Jang consolidate his power base in the nation’s capital.⁴⁸

The new regime did replace four out of ten provincial party chief secretaries and three out of ten provincial people’s committee chairmen in the past eighteen months (see Table 1). But that fits the past pattern of provincial party and government personnel management practiced

46. “Capitalist Ideology and Culture and Youth Problem,” *Rodong Sinmun*, October 18, 2012.

47. “DPRK Marks First Mother Day,” Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), November 11, 2012.

48. Chairman of Pyongyang City Rural Economic Management Committee Ri Man Söng replaced Chang Kwang Hyök in April and Chairman of Pyongyang City People’s Committee Cha Hui Rim replaced Ryang Man Gil in September.

Table 1. Leadership Changes at the Provincial Level from 2012–June 2013

Date	Position	New Appointee	Predecessor
2013/03	Kangwŏn Provincial Party Committee Chief Secretary	Pak Jŏng Nam	Paek Kye Ryong
2012/09	Pyongyang City People's Committee Chairman	Cha Hui Rim	Ryang Man Gil
2012/07	North Hwanghae Provincial People's Committee Chairman	Kang Yŏng Su	Ri Wŏn Il
2012/07	South Hwanghae Provincial Party Committee Chief Secretary	Pak Yŏng Ho	Ro Bae Gwŏn
2012/04	South Hamgyŏng Provincial Party Committee Chief Secretary	Thae Jŏng Su	Kwak Pŏm Gi
2012/03	South Hwanghae Provincial People's Committee Chairman	Choe Jŏng Ryŏng	O Ung Chang
2012/02	Chagang Provincial Party Committee Chief Secretary	Ryu Yŏng Sŏp	Chu Yŏng Sik

by the WPK CC Organization and Guidance Department (OGD). What is striking, though, is that five out of six of their predecessors were appointed by Kim Jong Il in 2010, which probably reflects Kim Jong Un's dissatisfaction with his father's choices.

Overhauling the Legacy Government

Annus Horribilis for the North Korean Military

After Kim Jong Il suffered from a stroke in August 2008, many pundits asserted that the growing influence of the Korean People's Army (KPA) under Kim's military-first policy would inevitably lead to a military-centered collective leadership in the wake of Kim's death.⁴⁹ These

49. Choi Choel Hee, "The Relationship between the Party and the Army under

pundits proved to be wrong. In the past year and a half, the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) under Kim Jong Un's guidance strengthened its domination over North Korean politics, bringing the military's senior leadership under unquestionable party control, repeatedly purging and publicly subduing it, and dramatically curtailing the military's policy-making influence. There is no question that the Kim Jong Il-inspired military-first era is coming to an end. It took Kim Jong Un less than several months to begin to adjust his father's military-first policy — all in the name of Kim Jong Il's patriotism. Eventually, he replaced it with his own "strategic policy line on carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously" or the "*pyongjin* line" — at the March 2013 Plenum of the WPK Central Committee held in Pyongyang, on March 31, 2013.⁵⁰

The unprecedented appointment of the civilian party functionary Choe Ryong Hae, backed by Jang Song Thaek and Kim Kyong Hui, as director of the KPA's General Political Department (GPD) in April 2012, unleashed a far-reaching rebalancing in party-military relations and created much stress in the GPD-General Staff relations. It rolled back the major advances of the military-first revolution, which was exemplified by the dominant positions of the professional military leadership during Kim Jong Il's rule.⁵¹ Under Choe Ryong Hae, not only did the WPK Central Committee (CC) fully restore its influence over the military party organizations, but the KPA General Political Department also re-asserted its control over the General Staff, Ministry of People's Armed Forces, and Defense Security Command, enabling its political representatives to prevail over security officers, military

the Military-First Policy," *Daily NK*, October 21, 2008, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk00400&num=4199>.

50. Report on WPK Central Committee Plenary Meeting, *Rodong Sinmun*, April 1, 2013, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/InterEn/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2013-04-01-0005.

51. "Pukhan Kunsu Ch'eje, P'yo'ngga-wa Cho'nmang" ("Evaluation of and Prospects for North Korea's Military System"), Chapter 4: "North Korean Military's Political Status and Role." Seoul: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) (in Korean), July 25, 2006, pp 81-97.

staff, and field officers.

In the past year and a half, we observed several waves of senior military reshuffles and wide-ranging reorganizations within the KPA commands and corps-level units. Kim Jong Un now has the fourth defense minister (Kim Yong Chun, Kim Jong Gak, Kim Kyok Sik, and Chang Chong Nam), third chief of KPA General Staff (Ri Yong Ho, Hyon Yong Chol, and Kim Kyok Sik), and third director of General Staff Operations Bureau (Kim Myong Guk, Ch'oe Pu Il, and Ri Yong Kil) serving under his command. Such a high rate of rotation at the top echelon of the North Korean military is unprecedented and creates tremendous uncertainty within the ranks of the political-military leadership. Against the backdrop of deteriorating food supplies and cutbacks in weapons procurement, these personnel changes planted seeds of distrust in party-military relations, brewing discontent and perhaps even silent resistance, shaking the military's morale, and undermining traditional military values and military discipline within the ranks.⁵²

National Security Apparatus Reshuffled

In the past year and a half, Kim Jong Un overhauled various components of the legacy national security establishment he had inherited from Kim Jong Il, and installed his own key security aides. His moves served to strengthen his personal authority and the party's leadership over the key players and main security institutions.⁵³ The surprise

52. Kwon Yang Chu, "Weekly Defense Forum" [chugankukpangnondan]: "The Kim Jong Un Regime's Ruling System Over the Military and Prospects for the Military's Role" (in Korean) (Seoul: Center for Military Planning of Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2012).

53. To shore up support within the security establishment, Kim Jong Un visited the Ministry of People's Armed Forces and Kim Il Sung Military University on August 29 and October 29 respectively, and the State Security Department (SSD) headquarters on October 6 and November 20. He also arranged for the national meetings of chiefs of local people's security stations under the Ministry of People's Security (MPS) in late November 23, active judges and prosecutors (November 25), judicial functionaries (December 5).

replacement of former State Security Department acting director U Tong Chuk in March 2012 revived the questions about the loyalty and political reliability of the SSD leadership, which was still roiled by the early 2011 purge of its deputy director Ryu Kyong, who was accused of spying for South Korea.⁵⁴ But, new SSD director General Kim Won Hong quickly dispelled any doubts about the SSD loyalty and effectiveness, and secured an edge over the legacy people's security minister Ri Myong Su,⁵⁵ who was replaced in February 2013 with Jang Song Thaek's protégé Col.-General Choe Pu Il, who was promoted to the four-star general rank on June 11, 2013. Defense Security Commander Cho Kyong Chol and Guard Commander General Yun Jong Rin have been able to keep their jobs so far, although, in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death, both commands were reportedly reorganized to accommodate the requirements and wishes of the country's new leader.

Kim Jong Un also gave preferential treatment to senior party and state officials responsible for the country's missile and nuclear weapons programs. In February 2012, Chu Kyu Chang, director of WPK CC Machine Industry Department, and Paek Se Pong, chairman of the Second Economy Committee (SEC), were promoted from lieutenant generals to colonel generals. Pak To Chun, party secretary responsible for the munitions industry, was given the title of KPA General also in February and promoted from alternate to full member of the WPK CC Politburo in April 2012. The successful launch of *Unha-3* on December 12, 2012, and the third nuclear test on February 12, 2013, further enhanced their influence and status. In these events, at least on the weapons development issues, Kim Jong Un appears to increasingly heed Hong Sŭng Mu, in charge of the North's nuclear weapons pro-

54. *Buk Ryu Kyong Bowuibu Bubujang*, '99bal chongsalhyunguiro jaeguh [Execution of SSD Deputy Director Ryu Kyong by 99 gun shots], June 20, 2011, <http://blog.daum.net/9hyewan/13426380>.

55. Both are four-star generals and members of the WPK CC Politburo, Central Military Commission (CMC), and National Defense Commission (NDC), but, Kim Won Hong's power ranking (No. 18) and official listing are one notch above and ahead of Ri Myong Su's (No. 19).

gram, and Choe Chun Sik, the head of the North's Second Academy of Natural Sciences, which is in charge of developing both conventional weapons and strategic arms.⁵⁶

Socio-Economic Policy Team Revamped

Since his inauguration, Kim Jong Un has revamped the national economic team, reaffirming the central role of the Cabinet in policymaking. He has given more power to key officials known for their "reformist" views and their commitment to raising the people's living standards through "pro-market" policies. In his conversation with responsible party officials at the WPK CC on April 6, 2012, Kim reaffirmed the principle of the "Cabinet's primary responsibility" for the nation's economy and of the "Cabinet's centrality" in managing national economic affairs.⁵⁷ For all practical purposes, in contrast to his father, the new leader has so far refrained from hands-on guidance, empowering his first premier Choe Yong Rim and his successor Pak Pong Ju to lead the nation's economic development. The return of former premier and the then director of the WPK's Central Committee light industry department Pak Pong Ju, who was regarded as "reformist" and "pro-market" during his previous tenure (2003-07), as DPRK's new premier replacing Choe Yong Rim, is in line with Jang Song Thaek's rising influence reflecting Pak's longtime work under Jang's wife, and confirms Pyongyang's intent to solidify the government's focus on the people's well-being and consumer economy.

Furthermore, the Fourth WPK Conference promoted two economic officials: party secretary Kwak Pom Gi, and vice-premier and chairman of the State Planning Commission Ro Du Chol, to the rank of alternate members of the WPK CC Politburo, thereby strengthening the Politburo's economic team vis-à-vis its military, security, and ideology wings.

56. "Mystery man seen next to N. Korean leader likely to be arms development official," *Yonhap*, December 18, 2012, http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/north_korea/2012/12/18/62/0401000000AEN20121218007400315F.HTML.

57. *Rodong Sinmun*, April 18, 2012, p. 1.

Since January 2012, the regime has replaced almost two thirds of vice-premiers and Cabinet ministers, appointing five new vice-premiers, twenty-five ministers and commission chairmen (see Table 2 for details), scores of vice-ministers, and dozens of new ministerial department and bureau directors. The replacement of a third of provincial rural economy leaders, while not unusual, must reflect the regime's persistent concern about food security and rural development problems. These new officials will spearhead the long-expected agricultural reforms in the North's rural areas.

Table 2. New Vice-Premiers, Cabinet Ministers, and Provincial Rural Economy Leaders Appointed by Kim Jong Un from 2012–June 2013.

Date	Position	Name
2013/05/06	Minister of State Construction Control	Kwŏn Sŏng-ho
2013/04/01	Minister of Chemical Industry	Ri Mu-yŏng
2013/04/01	Minister of Higher Education and President of Kim Il Sung University	T'ae-Hyŏng-ch'ŏl
2013/04/01	Minister of State Resource Development	Ri Ch'un-sam
2013/04/01	Minister of Fisheries	Ri Hyŏk
2013/04/01	Minister of Public Health	Kang Ha-kuk
2013/04/01	Minister of Land and Environment Preservation	Kim Kyŏng-jun
2013/04/01	Minister of Crude Oil Industry	Pae Hak
2013/04/01	Minister of Agriculture	Ri Ch'ŏl-man
2013/04/01	Minister of City Management	Kang Yŏng-su
2012/12/24	Minister of Coal Industry	Rim Nam-su
2012/12	Chairman of Kangwon Provincial Rural Economic Management Committee	Pak Tu Phil
2012/10/31	Minister of Metal Industry	Han Hyo Yŏn
2012/10/16	Minister of Physical Culture and Sports	Ri Chong Mu
2012/10/15	Minister of Electronics Industry	Kim Chae Sŏng
2012/10/04	Minister of Agriculture	Hwang Min

Date	Position	Name
2012/10	Chairman of South Hamgyong Provincial Rural Economic Management Committee	Kim Song Bong
2012/08/27	Chairman of State Science and Education Commission	Choe Sang Gŏn
2012/08	Vice-Premier	Chŏn Sŏng Hun
2012/05/22	Minister of Metal Industry	Chŏn Sŏng Hun
2012/05/21	Minister of Electric Power	Kim Man Su
2012/05/04	Minister of Land and Marine Transport	Kang Chong Gwan
2012/04	Chairman of North P'yongan Provincial Rural Economic Management Committee	Kye Myŏng Chŏl
2012/04/13	Minister of Commerce	Ri Sŏng Ho
2012/04	Vice-Premier	Ri Sŏng Ho
2012/04	Vice-Premier	Ri Chŏl Man
2012/04	Vice-Premier	Kim In Sik
2012/03	Minister of Machine-Building Industry	Ri Chong Guk
2012/02/09	Minister of Posts and Telecommunications	Sim Chŏl Ho
2012/02	Minister of Finance	Choe Kwang Jin
2012/02/01	Chairman of Joint Venture and Investment Committee	Ri Kwang Gŏn
2012/01	Chairman of Education Commission	Kim Sŏng-tu
2012/01	Vice-Premier	Kim Yŏng-jin

Foreign Policy Line Adjusted

When Kim Jong Un assumed power in December 2011, the world saw him as a young new leader who, given his education in Europe, might be reform-minded. A year and a half later, he comes across more like a reckless bully. Under Kim's rule, North Korea has emerged as a revolutionary power that seeks to alter the regional balance of power in its favor, expand its resource base, and gain international recognition by building up strategic arms capabilities and using the

military alliance with its long-time benefactor China to frustrate and turn to its advantage the hostile policies⁵⁸ pursued by its enemy states. During his first year and a half in power, Kim Jong Un made some adjustments in the strategic foreign policy line he inherited from his father.

Since the beginning of 2013, the security situation on the Korean Peninsula has taken a dramatic turn for the worse, following North Korea's satellite launch in December 2012, its third nuclear test in February 2013, and the passage of the UN Security Council Resolutions 2087 and 2094, which condemned both tests and imposed new international sanctions on the North Korean regime. Pyongyang's nuclear breakout has emboldened its young and untested leader to set aside decades-old security commitments made by his predecessors and to issue repeated clear and present threats of preemptive nuclear strikes against the North's enemies — the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.

Kim Jong Un did his best to keep Beijing and Moscow on his side in international disputes without significant costs to Pyongyang's core national interests. But, he showed no desire to back off from the WPK's unification strategy and tough stance against Seoul. He capitalized on Washington's disengagement and took full advantage of President Obama's policy of strategic neglect to further advance his long-range missile and nuclear arms development programs. He repeatedly probed Tokyo's intentions through inter-governmental and behind-the-scenes contacts without relenting vociferous anti-Japanese propaganda. He continued to support his allies in the decades-long revolutionary fight against the world imperialism — Iran and Syria, while making some minor modifications in North Korea's Middle

58. In the North Korean perception, these "hostile" policies range from political isolation, diplomatic pressure, military containment, and proliferation security initiative to economic sanctions and trade embargoes. For a detailed official discussion of the US "hostile policy," see DPRK Terms U.S. Hostile Policy Main Obstacle in Resolving Nuclear Issue, Memorandum of DPRK Ministry of Foreign affairs, Pyongyang: Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), August 31, 2012.

Eastern policy to account for dramatic changes in the ruling regimes brought about by the Arab Spring in such former friendly countries as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria.

Looking back at his first year and a half in power, I believe Kim Jong Un's leadership style is characterized by bold aggressive actions, bordering on brinkmanship, with two principal traits distinguishing him from Kim Jong Il. First, the son is very competitive, maximalist in his aspirations, and driven by machismo, in contrast to his father's time-induced cautiousness, minimalist desires, and pragmatism. Moderation and patience may be just a function of age and experience; time will tell. Second, Kim Jong Un is tenacious and even obdurate, and, therefore, he is rather unpredictable in terms of what he can do, how far and how hard he can push to achieve his goals, unlike his father who was prudent and far-sighted, and, therefore, fairly predictable in his maneuvering, despite his occasionally impulsive behavior.

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