

Political Dimensions of North Korea's Third-Generation Succession and the Potential for Crisis

Robert Collins¹

Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy

Abstract

The death of Kim Jong-il leaves Northeast Asian regional actors concerned about the stability of the Kim regime and leads to questions as to Kim Jong-un's ability to consolidate power in a party-state already threatened internally by a lack of resources and a moribund economy. Projecting the potential for crisis in the new Kim Jong-un regime centers on leadership and continuity issues. Will the North Korean power elite support Kim Jong-un to preserve a system in which members of the power elite themselves became successful? Or will domestic economic shortcomings challenge Kim Jong-un's ability to subsidize the power elite's lifestyle and/or the integrity of the elite-led institutions of political power? Who supports the younger Kim and how? Understanding these issues is critical to preparations by the Republic of Korea – United States Alliance as well as regional actors such as China, Russia and Japan. Kim Jong-un's youth and political immaturity provide justified concerns for all regional stakeholders. The complexity of Kim Jong-il's leadership style leaves his son with serious challenges in trying to duplicate a similar leadership environment. Failure to match that leadership style in the near-to-mid term is a threat to not only stability in North Korea but to Northeast Asia as well.

Keywords: North Korea, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, succession, nuclear, proliferation, Korean Workers' Party, Central Military Committee, Organization and Guidance Department, U.S. interests,

Introduction

Kim Jong-il's death of a heart attack on December 17, 2011, set about a significant flurry of political and security concerns throughout the Northeast Asian region and beyond. The cause for this concern is clearly based in the uncertainty relative to how the Kim family regime and its provocative policies will continue under the leadership of the 29-year-old Kim Jong-un through a third-generation succession, or even

whether the regime will survive such a transition of power given the younger Kim's age, political inexperience, the short time (three years at most) he has had to prepare, and the political challenges of dealing with a moribund economy.

Yet Kim Jong-il's death did not exactly come as a surprise, or, at least, it should not have. In 2010, South Korean and American doctors both made the medical assessment, based on cases similar to Kim Jong-il's symptoms, that Kim Jong-il had three-five years to live from the time of his stroke in August 2008. According to those doctors, over half of post-stroke patients similar to Kim Jong-il become significantly disabled within five years and survival rates are little better than 35-40 percent.² No doubt under the Kim Jong-il's post-stroke physical condition, his biggest enemy was the stress of ensuring that his third son succeeded in taking the reins of power to preserve the Kim family regime without any major challenges to the younger Kim's authority and avoiding progressive instability within North Korea's fragile political-economic environment.

But it is the consequences of Kim Jong-il's passing that clearly concern the leaders of every state that perceives itself as having a major stake in North Korean stability, all for different reasons and most of which are well understood. China no doubt sees this transition of power in North Korea as both opportunity and challenge as they attempt to maintain North Korea as a strategic and operational buffer, separating them from American political and military influence. Maintaining stability in North Korea is the foundation of securing that buffer. South Korea will no doubt see this as an opportunity to improve South-North relations and reduce the extreme animosity that exists between the two since the sinking of the Republic of Korea Ship *Cheonan* and the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeongdo Island. Japan will seek to reinvigorate discussions on the issue of abductions and secure less acrimonious relations as well as economic cooperation. For the U.S., the stakes are equally as great as those of the other regional actors. North Korea's nuclear and missile programs are direct threats not only to its regional allies but to the U.S. mainland as well. But it is the North's proliferation of nuclear technology that harbingers danger for other regions beyond Northeast Asia and even for the U.S. mainland in the form of nuclear terrorism carried out by non-state actors that have connections to the North's illicit activities networks.

Considering all of the foreign policy decision-making for these Northeast Asian actors and the international community at large, as well as their assessments of realistic threats, political stability in North Korea may be seen as offering a less immediate threat to their state interests, despite North Korea's possessing one of history's worst human rights records and Pyongyang's unforgivable crimes against humanity. It does not take much analysis to see that a failed third-generation succession could ultimately lead to either implosion in the form of coup d'état (and the first will not likely be the last) or factional infighting leading to rebellion, or even civil war; explosion in the form of miscalculation due to mismanagement of provocations, responses and counter-responses, or even war as a result; or all of these possibilities in progressive stages. All of these scenarios have related refugee, humanitarian disaster, nuclear program instability and even nuclear proliferation ramifications to them. With regard to planning for these contingencies, we all know that the Republic of Korea – United States Alliance has not been asleep at the wheel militarily; however, in the political sphere, readiness for a crisis as potentially monumental as North Korean instability is an extremely abstract and challenging concept. States may have planned for contingencies, but their preparedness remains in question.³ Although three-four years is certainly a short time to ensure that the regime's succession process is completed under stable conditions, it is also a relatively short time for regional states and the Republic of Korea – United States Alliance to ensure that they are prepared for all contingencies, relative to a crisis in the post-Kim Jong-il era.

Considering the relatively early death of Kim Jong-il in relation to his son's preparation to succeed, the succession process seems to be going well for the time being. The funeral procession for Kim Jong-il provided a clear idea of the power group in Kim regime. Walking alongside the hearse with Kim Jong-un, were Jang Song-taek (younger Kim's uncle and Director of the Korean Workers' Party [KWP] Administrative Department), Kim Ki-nam (Director, KWP Secretariat's Propaganda and Agitation Department and lead propagandist for power succession), Choe Tae-bok (KWP Secretary for Education), Ri Yong-ho (Vice Marshal and Chief of the Korean People's Army General Staff), Kim Yong-chun (Minister of People's Armed Forces), Kim Jong-gak (General and Acting Director of the General Political Bureau), and U Dong-chuk (acting Director of the State Security Department). These individuals are the core leadership of the Kim regime and are critical to

Kim Jong-un's successful consolidation of power. As Kim Jong-il began to lay the foundation for succession, the aforementioned individuals all undoubtedly played a major role in that process.

It has now been a year and a half since the Korean Workers' Party held their Third Representatives Conference in September 2010 and Kim Jong-un was promoted to four-star general, set up as the Kim Family successor through appointments to senior Party positions, and effectively shown to the world on the pages of the *Rodong Shinmun* and national TV as successor to his father, all within a three day span. For the most part, the succession process seemed to be going quite well, though, there were a few bumps in the road. The speed of this transition was not surprising, considering the necessity of addressing Kim Jong-il's mortality and the future of the North Korean state. But although Kim Jong-un has thus far managed to garner the support of the power elite, it is unlikely that he has gained the support of the North Korean populace as a whole.

In a country where legitimacy is tied to the "Great Leader," Kim Il-song, long-term party propaganda efforts have sought to seal the concept of legitimacy in the North Korean mind. But is this bizarre concept of a family regime accepted by the North Korean populace at large? Testimony from North Korean refugees, most of whom still praise Kim Il-song even after defection to the ROK, as well as NGO reports from inside North Korea, indicate that such is not the case. Most importantly, the North's failed economy, and, more specifically the Kim regime's failure to address the dire needs of the population, have eaten away at the people's trust in the leadership of the Kim regime. Beyond that, demonstrating the youngest Kim's leadership, despite his young age, to the populace is certainly an overwhelming challenge for the most experienced of North Korean propagandists.

As one Western diplomat opined, "We know more about distant galaxies than we do about North Korea."⁴ That's obviously an intended exaggeration but the Kim regime's policy of secrecy in all decision-making promotes such interpretations. However, the regime's efforts and methods at promoting its third generation political succession are there for anyone to see. In fact, Kim Jong-il made the process of transition obvious. What is not so apparent is whether the succession will succeed in the mid-to-long term and what that will mean for both North Korean instability and its consequences for regional and even global security.

This article discusses potential crisis scenarios that may develop as a result of Kim Jong-il's death and the possible instability that may result from Kim Jong-un's ascension to power in Pyongyang's byzantine political environment.

The Political Power System in North Korea Left Inherited By Kim Jong-un

North Korea's political process resembles a monarchy more than a socialist country. For all intents and purposes, Kim Jong-il was the North Korean state in a similar sense as France's Louis the XIV.⁵ His father, Kim Il-song, was certainly at that level, if not to a greater degree.

It is widely understood that Kim Jong-il's rule was based on political control, terror and patronage. His personalized form of carrot and stick purposely created competition among the power elite to please Kim Jong-il in order to receive commensurate benefits and privileges personally and for the institution they served. Beyond this, Kim Jong-il was able to accomplish and maintain his level of political dominance in North Korea because of all the "hats" he wore. In other words, he held several key positions within the power structure simultaneously. Kim Il-song inaugurated Kim Jong-il's leadership in 1973 by appointing him as the Korean Workers' Party Secretary for both the Organization and Guidance Department (a personnel and political center of gravity from which to direct, monitor and evaluate all activity in the party, government and military, as well as to supervise all personnel decisions) and the Propaganda and Agitation Department (responsible for controlling all information within North Korea, operationalizing party propaganda, media operations, informational and instructional material). Appointed in December 1991, Kim became the Supreme Commander of the North Korean military, from which he commanded the Korean People's Army, the reserves, and all paramilitary forces. Promoted in April 1992, Kim became a Marshal of the Republic, a military rank that – with apparent intention – fell short of the military rank of Grand Marshal (or Generalissimo) held by his father, Kim Il-song, but exceeded the marshal rank held by a few of Kim Il-song's surviving contemporaries such as Ri Ul-sol. Kim Jong-il was posthumously promoted to the same Grand Marshal rank as his father.⁶ Kim became the Chairman of the National Defense Commission in April 1993, a position from which he led the state and managed all aspects of military and internal security administration and military industrial production.

He was the defacto Director of the State Security Department (the director position had been vacant since 1987), North Korea's secret police that conducted the preponderance of political terror operations and was ruthless in rooting out any challenges to the authority of the Kim family. Kim Jong-un has reportedly taken over some of these responsibilities in apparent on-the-job-training, and a move that is vitally necessary if the transition of power is to succeed. Kim Jong-un has undoubtedly taken control of most aspects of the security agencies and the military. But it would be unrealistic to assume that he has done so with the same skill level as his father.

In 1997, Kim Jong-il became the Korean Workers' Party General Secretary (where he was responsible for all party affairs, and held dominance in all political activity). Kim was also the Chairman of the KWP Central Military Committee (from which he conducted oversight of all military-related policy decisions), a member of the KWP Central Committee (a standard requirement for higher party assignments), and a member of the KWP Politburo Standing Committee (from which he conducted oversight of all KWP policy development; prior to September 2010, Kim was the only member of this standing committee, meaning he had little use for the input of other Politburo members).

But above all that, and more precisely, because of all the positions held simultaneously, Kim Jong-il was able to wield absolute power as the Suryong – a position designed to be the totalitarian dictator – because he was able to execute or imprison anyone and their families for any reason without retribution or restrictions by law. He was above the law in all things, regardless of what was stated in the Party charter, North Korea's Constitution, or domestic civil law. Kim Jong-il used his power to decide all issues regardless of the legal, legislative, or historical precedents, and followed up by changing the state constitution, the party charter, or appropriate laws at will. For Kim Jong-un to reach this pinnacle of absolute power, he must inherit all of these positions. Not to do so would indicate he has begun power sharing with party-military elite.

Arguably, the most important of all these hats is OGD Secretary. The OGD is the key to this succession as it was to the last one. Since Kim Jong-il took over the position of Party Secretary for Organization and Guidance, the OGD has been the key platform from which to conduct oversight in all policy decisions or directives and the implementation through party guidance. (An inspection by the OGD is

considered equivalent to facing the wrath of God in the North.) Even the military and internal security agencies take orders from the OGD through respective and specific OGD oversight sections. The OGD was the center of gravity during Kim Jong-il's transition to power, and it remained his center of gravity until his death. The OGD must be the center of gravity in conducting Kim Jong-un's transition to the position of Suryong. It is also the platform from which personnel decisions are made for all regime elites. Kim Jong-un must use the OGD and the Propaganda and Agitation Department to shape the succession process through personnel evaluations, promotions and assignments; implement focused propaganda campaigns, direct the monitoring targets and priorities of the security organizations, and conduct purges as appropriate. It will be the responsibility of officials in this department to anticipate potential crises and recommend appropriate courses of action to Kim Jong-un. The OGD is manned by only the highest of the highest in North Korea's stringent social class policies and thus the most loyal of the party elite.

Finally, all of the power that Kim Jong-il amassed through these positions enabled him to lead North Korea informally through non-structured meetings and communications with the institutional leadership of the party, the military, the security agencies and the government. All of these institutions sent their daily and/or periodic reports directly to Kim Jong-il's personal staff and the OGD, thereby giving Kim the option of providing decisions, feedback and guidance directly to specific institutional leaders, whether during his routine on-site inspections, social occasions (an important venue of Suryong-elite communication) or any other eventuality. Kim Jong-il was not shaped by institutional norms and practices. Kim Jong-un must carry out these functions with the same skill level to succeed in ruling North Korea's Byzantine political structure.

The Successor

Based on the actions explained below, Kim Jong-un was designated successor as early as January 2009.⁷ Born in 1982 or 1983, depending on the source one quotes, prior to Kim Jong-il's death Kim Jong-un was referred to in North Korea as "Boss Kim," "Party Center," "Young Captain," "Morning Star King (by his mother, Ko Yong-hui)," "Young General Kim," and "genius of military affairs." But do North Koreans really know who he is any better than we do? Not likely.

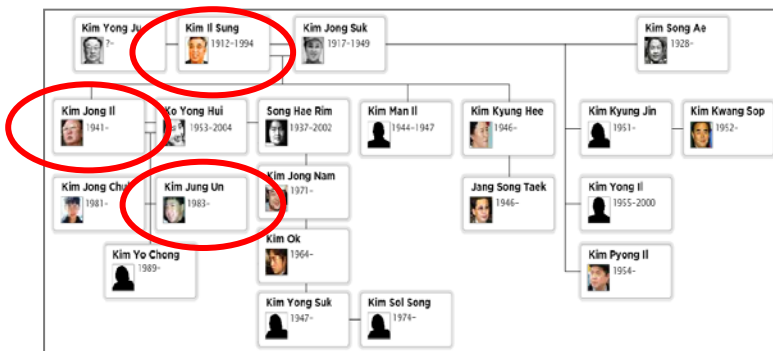


Figure 1: Kim Family Tree.⁸

After returning to North Korea in 2001 from a private Western education in Switzerland at the middle and high school levels where he learned to speak English and German, Kim Jong-un studied as an artillery officer at the Kim Il-song Military College from 2002 to 2007. He spent three years in the basic officer's course, followed by two years in advanced studies where his thesis focused on targeting by using the Global Positioning System. He then served as an artillery officer for a year under the guidance of then-Pyongyang Defense Command Commander, General (now Vice Marshal) Ri Yong-ho.⁹ This experience is vital to a leader who has just taken over the largest artillery force in the world as well as a huge arsenal of short- and medium-range missiles that can hit not only South Korea but U.S. territories and assets in the Pacific as well.¹⁰ As the North works to match a nuclear warhead with a long-range missile capable of reaching the U.S. mainland (which is presumably years away), Kim Jong-un's background will come in handy for understanding the technical aspects of briefings.

Propagandizing the Succession Process

Propaganda is an extremely important aspect of the succession process and the lead organization is the Party Secretariat's Propaganda and Agitation Department. NK propaganda consistently manipulates historical facts and portrays North Korea and its people as victims of die-hard enemies in order to create the conditions for the Kim family personality cult. In this scenario, Kim leaders are portrayed as fighting against would-be invaders, thus justifying their leadership of the party-state. Extending that personality cult to Kim Jong-un has been underway for two years now. There have been several examples of this propaganda

effort during this time:

- Neighborhood unit chiefs began distributing propaganda about Kim Jong-un as the successor in June of 2009 to all respective neighborhood occupants. Propaganda documents to support the succession were distributed to party, military and government organizations for use beginning in January 2010.¹¹
- Mutual visits to specific sites resulted in plaques commemorating both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un in joint visits.¹²
- The KWP newspaper *Rodong Shinmun* increased its pages from six to ten on November 4, 2010, in order to cover the father-son inspection of a construction site in Chagang Province.¹³
- North Korean television broadcast on May 11 of this year a documentary that showed a placard stating, “Let’s fight for the beloved supreme commander Kim Jong-il and honorable general Kim Jong-un.”¹⁴
- A song entitled “Footsteps” was purportedly written by North Korean composer Ri Jong-o and has been performed on a number of occasions in North Korean social circles.¹⁵
- The Kim regime has awarded a top medal to Kwon Hyok-bong, vice director of the Party’s Propaganda and Agitation Department, in an apparent efforts to emphasize the importance of the Kim family and the succession process. Kwon was especially praised for his “contribution to educating North Koreans” and for producing “monumental masterpieces flawless in ideological content and artistry suited to the features of a prosperous and powerful country.”¹⁶
- Kim Jong-un has been credited with “150 day speed battle” campaigns to increase productivity.
- Immediately after North Korea’s second nuclear test on May 25, 2009, all North Korean foreign posts were informed of

the decision to make Kim Jong-un the designated successor.¹⁷

- North Korean propaganda has recently produced and distributed a documentary film (September 2011) entitled “One Year under the Banner of the Supreme Leader” that glorifies the achievements of Kim Jong-un. Use of the term indicates that the succession propaganda process is in high gear.¹⁸ The Korean term used for Supreme Leader is “yongjang,” a term not generally used for Kim Jong-il.
- But perhaps most importantly, every successful military event (from the North Korean perspective) has been credited by the North Korean media as resulting from Kim Jong-un’s strong leadership and design. Much of the South Korean media also portrays these events as Kim Jong-un’s initiatives, but that is highly unlikely. Crediting the younger Kim, however, was and is effective in propagandizing his leadership skills.

After Kim Jong-il’s death, the funeral procession demonstrated that Kim Jong-un was in command, whether because of support from the power elite that accompanied Kim Jong-un and his father’s hearse, or from his own machinations. Indeed, the younger Kim has gained the title of Supreme Commander.¹⁹ Given the extreme personality cults built around Kim Il-song and Kim Jong-il, we should expect the same level of effort for Kim Jong-un, a daunting task to accomplish smoothly and effectively.

Indeed, the indoctrination process seems to have begun with the political guidance to the military to see the youngest Kim as a “genius of military affairs” and assertions that the “young general” was responsible for developing a strategy of “shock and offense.”²⁰ But before all this was the ultimate step in the North Korean pantheon of cult worship – the distribution of badges with Kim Jong-un’s picture as early as 2006, a full two years before Kim Jong-il’s stroke. For some reason this all stopped abruptly, perhaps out of concern for too much too soon.

As one noted North Korean expert has observed, “When it comes to the succession issues, unless it is on the front page of *Rodong Shinmun*, it is not that relevant.”²¹

Starting The Succession Process

In a very relevant study, Jason Brownlee of the University of Texas has examined 258 dictatorships between 1945 and 2006. Of these, 23 attempted hereditary succession, and only nine were successful.²² Brownlee identified three factors that have made hereditary succession distinguishable from other forms of leadership change: transfer of top governing authority from father to son; preparation of power transfer prior to the ruler's death; and absence of formal democratic procedures or legal stipulation of familial rule.²³ We should point out that only North Korea is attempting a third generation succession. That succession process will impact not only North Korea, but all regional actors, if not the world, because of the consequences in both the success and failure scenarios.

From the time of Kim Jong-il's stroke in August 2008 until his death, we have seen in North Korea the official announcement of Kim Jong-un as the successor, a second nuclear test, a long-range missile launch, a tightening of market controls, currency reform, Northern Limit Line skirmishes, provocations such as the sinking of the Republic of Korea Navy's *Cheonan* corvette, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong-Do Island. In other words, it has been business as usual for North Korea in its foreign policy efforts, albeit with some upgrades.

The Kim regime's second succession process began years ago, albeit slowly. The General Political Bureau – the organization providing the military with its political officers at every level – and the security services began direct reporting to Kim Jong-un in late 2009. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un started to involve himself in the Party's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) decision-making of power elite personnel matters in early 2009.²⁴ These processes are critical to Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power.

On January 8, 2009, the OGD distributed guidance materials to senior party cadres in all provincial party organizations, explaining that Kim Jong-il had chosen Kim Jong-un as his successor. The OGD also sent out such guidance to all Korean People's Army colonels and above through the General Political Bureau.²⁵ This action was followed in May of 2009 by Kim Jong-un's securing his hold on the North Korean military through the GPB-led KPA Party Conference. Given the importance of Kim Jong-il's ruling principle of military-first politics, such actions should have been seen as being critical to the succession process.

Subsequent to this guidance during January and February of 2009, the State Security Department and the Ministry of Public Security began conducting political meetings declaring loyalty to Kim Jong-un.²⁶ Essentially, Kim Jong-il decided that the most important steps in securing succession lay in those organizations that were most critical to the power structure, ones that he himself had shaped and empowered. Senior personnel in this process were Ri Je-Kang (who has since died under suspicious circumstances); Chang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law and Director of the Party's Administration Department; and General Kim Jong-gak, the defacto Director of the General Political Bureau which provides political leadership of the KPA at the unit level. (GPB Director Vice Marshal Cho Myong-nok was ill at the time and passed away in the fall of 2010.) Furthermore, the Kim regime has been replacing older personnel in mid-level positions in the military, party and the cabinet with individuals in their 30's and 40's in an apparent attempt to boost the number of key personnel loyal to Kim Jong-un.²⁷ Radio Free Asia has reported that military commanders have been promoted at younger ages also.²⁸ This is consistent with the trends of the Kim Il-song / Kim Jong-il succession process, older party and government cadres have been replaced with younger cadre in their 30s and 40s to promote the succession of Kim Jong-un. Security agencies such as the State Security Department, the Ministry of Public Security, and the prosecutor's offices are also being staffed with younger and younger personnel in an apparent effort to nurture loyalty among those that must defend the state from within, loyalty focused on the future leadership of Kim Jong-un.²⁹ There has been a similar process in the rubber-stamp, 687-member Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's legislature, where delegates in their 20s and 30s from various economic and state organizations, including the party and the military, have been appointed assemblymen serving a five-year terms.³⁰

When NDC Vice-Chairman Cho Myong-nok died of natural causes in November 2010, Kim Jong-un was listed second only to his father on the funeral committee list, even ahead of KPA Chief of the General Staff, Vice-Marshal Ri Yong-ho.³¹ These protocol listings are good indicators of whom Kim Jong-il thought should be seen at what level of power and influence. Though a simple indicator of Kim Jong-il's intent to the outside world, it was more a message to the rest of North Korea who the next boss was going to be. On September 23, 2011, Kim Jong-un sat for commemoration pictures with Kim Jong-il and visiting Laotian President

Choummaly Sayasone in what was publicized as a “good will visit” but was likely a “summit on-the-job-training” for the young successor.³²

The Kim regime has taken a three-prong approach to the succession process: political restructuring, propaganda, and domestic repression. On the repression side, the succession process, meaning the Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un transition, instituted “repressive political measures such as controls over defectors and the border.”³³ Anti-reform policies hurt the regime in terms of its ability to garner resources, whether to support the regime or the people.

Extreme efforts, credited to the younger Kim, to eliminate “anti-socialist behavior” were part of initiatives to beef up regime security. The Propaganda and Agitation Department distributed an instruction manual entitled “On thoroughly eliminating anti-socialist phenomena in every area of community life,” that explained the why and how of eliminating such anti-socialism activity. The manual stated as its three goals, “We must pull out the roots of individualism and selfishness, and firmly arm ourselves with group awareness, we must thoroughly eliminate the illusion of money and the illusion of foreign currency, and we must battle fiercely against the invasion of imperialist ideology and culture.”³⁴ However, as a sign of the times in the moribund economy of North Korea, inspections by North Korea’s security agencies are more an opportunity for ingratiating themselves through bribe money than suppressing “anti-socialist behavior.”³⁵

Succession Structure

By all signs, the succession process has gone according to plan. On 31 December Kim Jong-un was named the Korean People’s Army Supreme Commander by the Korean Workers’ Party Politburo.³⁶

Even North Korea’s aged elite in senior positions greet the 29-year-old Kim Jong-un with a deep bow, an unusual practice within a Confucian society. As one of South Korea’s top analysts on North Korea, Cheong Seong-chang of the Sejong Institute, has stated, “The obvious message of all this to North Koreans is that Kim Jong-un is now dictating to the top elite.”³⁷ Accomplishing this milestone took an immense amount of planning and decisive decision-making, sometimes ruthless, no doubt. Getting the power elite on the same page has not been easy.

To understand how crises can develop within the succession process, it is important to understand how Kim Jong-il reshaped the authority

landscape in North Korea's political-military structure. No doubt drawing from his own experiences and unique perspective as the Suryong (totalitarian dictator in political science terms), Kim Jong-il implemented numerous initiatives to build a succession structure that he saw as the surest path to a stable transition of power to his third son. Of these initiatives, none had a greater impact than the Third Korean Workers' Party Delegates Conference of September 2010. At this conference, the first of its kind in 44 years, Kim Jong-il rewrote the Party charter and restructured the Korean Workers' Party's leading institutions in a manner that was both unique and telling in design.

First, employing the forum of the Conference, Kim Jong-il appointed himself (there was no voting) as the Party General Secretary, Chairman of the Party Central Military Committee, member of the Politburo Standing Committee, and member of the Party Central Committee. Furthermore, Kim Jong-il essentially made it official that his third son, Kim Jong-un, would be his successor and appointed him Vice-Chairman of the Party's Central Military Committee, even though the younger Kim had very limited service in line units (at least a step up from Kim Jong-il who had had none). The morning before the conference, Kim Jong-un was promoted to four-star general.³⁸

Secondly, the party delegates revised the party charter in several areas. Some of the most important changes were redefining the roles between the party and the military:

- The old Party Charter preamble stated the Korean Workers' Party was a Marxist-Leninist party established by Kim Il-song, but the new Party charter eliminated that terminology and stated that the KWP was Kim Il-song's party. (*Essentially, this focused all regime legitimacy in the name and family of Kim Il-song, thus laying the groundwork for legitimacy of Kim Jong-un's succession based on bloodline.*)
- The new party charter states in its preamble that "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" and "protect the succession of the Party's construction."³⁹
- Where there was no such reference in the old party charter, Chapter 3, Article 22 of the new charter stated that the Party General Secretary was automatically the Chairman of the

Party Central Military Committee (CMC). *(Combining this with Kim Jong-un's appointment as the Vice-Chairman of the CMC, implied that Kim Jong-un automatically became the Party General Secretary as he succeeded his father as CMC Chairman. It should be noted here that the KPA Chief of the General Staff, the senior officer in the KPA, Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho, is also a Vice-Chairman of the CMC. That role is apparently intended to be a chief military advisor.)*

- The CMC changed from being defined under Chapter 3, Article 27, under the old charter as being responsible for building up all military power, organizing military industries, and commanding the military, to being defined in Chapter 3, Article 27 of the new party charter as organizing and leading through the party all tasks within the military, and leading all national defense industries. *(Strengthening the power of the CMC became an enabler of Kim Jong-un's hold over the military and thus improving the chances of a successful succession.)*
- Chapter 7, Article 51, of the old party charter stated that General Political Bureau was the action arm of the party organization within the KPA. Article 49 of the new charter states that the GPB has the same authority as the KWP Central Committee. *(This gives the party leadership greater authority over military matters, further empowers political officers serving in line units, corps and below, and increases Kim Jong-un's influence over the military.)*⁴⁰

These changes expanded the authority of the CMC and provided a more secure foundation for Kim Jong-un's control of the military through the party. But it should be noted here that there appears to be some confusion about changes also made in the 2009 DPRK Constitution that increased the power of the National Defense Commission, to which Kim Jong-un has yet to be appointed (we should expect this to happen in the first half of 2012). For instance, Article 100 stated that the chairman of the National Defense Commission is also the supreme leader of the DPRK, and Article 102 stated the chairman of the NDC is the supreme commander⁴¹ of the overall armed forces of the DPRK and commands and directs all the armed forces of the state.⁴² (In apparent contradiction,

the North Korea Central Annual of 1989 stated that the Supreme Commander position is part of the Central Military Committee.)⁴³ Article 102 essentially combines two of those primary “hats” that Kim Jong-il wore as Suryong, or totalitarian dictator. Whether this apparent contradiction was a change in heart by Kim Jong-il on where to place the actual political power in controlling the military or simple redundancy is yet to be seen. Of course, when Kim Jong-un becomes NDC Chairman, the point will be moot. As discussed earlier, Kim Jong-un was appointed Supreme Commander on December 31, 2011. It is interesting that he was appointed by the KWP Politburo to that position before being appointed to the National Defense Commission. This is an apparent indication of how important the position of Supreme Commander is in North Korea, particularly in the age of military-first politics where control of the military is more important than any other aspect of the North Korean political structure.

Thirdly, Kim Jong-il restructured the senior party apparatus and put more emphasis institutionally on a party-military linkup. By decree and not by party vote as called for in the party charter, Kim Jong-il dramatically restructured the Party Politburo, the Secretariat, and the Party Central Military Committee with new and more numerous personnel. These changes created political structures significantly different in terms of manning and structure from any other during Kim Jong-il’s rule and are in stark contrast to his focus on leading the state from the National Defense Commission, of which he was the Chairman.

Starting with the KWP Secretariat where there was less militarization of organizational staffing due to the technical nature of the Secretariat, the senior party secretaries and senior staffers all come from the highest social pedigree in North Korean society, based on their family history (family members of the Paektu line, Yongnamsan line [revolutionaries and their families who built the state and reconstructed society from 1946 to 1957], and Naktong line [Korean War veterans who fought down to the Naktong River in August 1950]) and educational roots (Mankyongdae Revolutionary Institute, Namsan School, Kim Il-song University, etc.)

The Party Politburo Standing Committee, which was established during the same Sixth Party Congress that Kim Jong-il was officially designated successor to Kim Il-song,⁴⁴ saw its membership increase from one – Kim Jong-il – to five. Kim Jong-il apparently wanted a foundation for the succession process, once he was no longer on the scene, and

appointed Premier Choe Yong-nim (a former secretary to Kim Il-song), leader of the Supreme People’s Assembly’s Presidium, Kim Yong-nam (a die-hard loyalist of the Kim family), and two military figures – Director of the military’s General Political Bureau, Vice Marshal Cho Myong-nok (who has since died), and the KPA Chief of the General Staff, Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho. Assuming that Cho Myong-nok will be replaced in due time – likely by General Kim Jong-gak – the Politburo Standing Committee now maintains its most militaristic profile – ever.⁴⁵ Full Politburo members increased from three to twelve, and candidate members rose from five to 15. Both of these numbers exceeded the limits of participation during Kim Jong-il’s rule. This increased membership provided young Kim with broad-based technical and military expertise in national policy consultation, something Kim Jong-il obviously felt he did not need.

But the most dramatic changes came in the Party’s Central Military Committee (CMC). Figure 2 shows the lineup of the CMC.

Figure 2. Korean Workers’ Party Central Military Committee (CMC) Membership as of September 2010

Name / Year of Birth	Military Rank	Positions
Kim Jong-il	Marshal of the Republic	Suryong; KWP General Secretary; Supreme Commander; Chairman, KWP CMC; NDC Chairman; OGD Director; KWP Politburo Standing Committee Member; 12 th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) member
Kim Jong-un	General	Vice-Chairman, KWP CMC; State Security Department Director; ⁴⁶ KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Ri Yong-ho	Vice Marshal	Vice-Chairman, KWP CMC; KWP Politburo Standing Committee Member; KPA Chief of General Staff; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Kim Yong-chun	Vice Marshal	Minister of People’s Armed Forces; NDC Vice-Chairman; KWP Politburo member; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Kim Jong-gak	General	(Acting) Director, General Political Bureau; KWP Politburo candidate member; NDC Member; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Kim Myong-kuk	General	Director, KPA Operations Bureau; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Kim Kyong-uk	General	1 st Vice-Director, Organization and Guidance Department (in charge of military party affairs); KWP CC member; 12 th SPA

Kim Won-hung	General	Commander, Military Security Command; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA; SPA Qualifications Committee member
Chong Myong-do	General	KPA Navy Commander; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Ri Byong-chol	General	KPA Air Force Commander; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Choe Bu-il	General	KPA Deputy Chief of General Staff; KWP CC member
Kim Yong-chol	Colonel General	Commander, General Reconnaissance Bureau; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Yun Chong-rin	General	Commander, Guards Command; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Chu Kyu-chang	Civilian	Secretary, KWP Machine Industries Department; KWP Politburo candidate member; NDC member; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Choe Sang-nyo	Lieutenant General	KWP CC member
Choe Kyong-song	Colonel General	KWP CC member
U Dong-chuk	General	State Security Department 1 st Vice Director; KWP Politburo candidate member; NDC member; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA
Choe Yong-hae	General	KWP Politburo candidate member; KWP Secretary
Chang Song-taek	Civilian	Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law; NDC Vice-Chairman; KWP Politburo candidate member; KWP Administration Department Director; Capital Construction Department Director; KWP CC member; 12 th SPA

There are several remarkable aspects to this new KWP CMC line-up, despite Kim Jong-il's recent death. First, there are two new vice-chairmen positions which Kim Jong-il assigned to Kim Jong-un and Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho. Prior to the Third Party Delegates Conference, there were no such positions. It is most interesting that Kim Jong-il had Kim Jong-un starting his leadership training in the CMC rather than in the Party's OGD or in the National Defense Commission. Secondly, the second generation of the Palchisan line (those who fought in the anti-Japanese insurgency in Manchuria prior to 1945) is represented in this membership line-up more than any previous lineup since 1980, indicating a sharp adherence to class structure in the senior levels of the power elite. This is a solid indicator that those who have profited most from being members of the "elite of the elite" are seen as the most loyal, and therefore supportive of regime succession. Thirdly, and most

importantly, this group of officers represents the most professionally capable and competent grouping of professional military officers and military civilians ever to serve together in a senior Korean Workers' Party organization. The CMC is manned by every area of military expertise and leadership in North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, as well as senior political control of the state's internal security organizations. That has never happened before. It is very apparent that Kim Jong-il surrounded Kim Jong-un with the most loyal and competent military support group he could, thus setting the conditions for the most effective national and military security possible during the succession transition.

This is no small development. Now that Kim Jong-il has passed from the scene, the North Korean military has essentially conducted a palace coup with Kim Jong-un as the leader, based on its positioning in political organizations and without any need for overt action. This is not to say that Kim Jong-un will automatically be removed from the head position atop the North Korean power structure but that he will have little choice in power sharing. The consequences of this arrangement cannot be anything but the strengthening of the North's military programs.

Of great interest within this group is Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho. The son of Ri Pong-su, a contemporary of Kim Il-song during the anti-Japanese partisan struggle and former Principal of the highly exclusive Mankyongdae Revolutionary School,⁴⁷ Vice Marshal Ri comes from the highest politically-reliable background possible outside the Kim family itself. It should be no surprise that he is a CMC Vice-Chairman, concurrently a Politburo Standing Committee Member, the KPA Chief of General Staff, and a five-star general.

Beyond the Third Party Delegates Conference, there have been numerous other developments that have had a critical impact in developing the succession process. One of the more important was placing Kim Jong-un in a leadership position where he can exercise social control in the same manner that his father did for several decades.⁴⁸ After the State Security Department Director Yi Chin-su died in 1987, the position had been vacant with three vice-directors supervising various areas of operations, essentially making Kim Jong-il the defacto director. Kim Jong-il's positions as the Suryong, OGD Director and the NDC Chairman made that a moot point anyway. The apparent transition from the National Defense Commission to the Party Central Military Committee as the headquarters for military-first politics

is a difficult transition, particularly from a policy implementation standpoint. But for military-first politics, it probably does not matter much where decisions are made that favor the military in terms of resources, politics, and other forms of support. According to South Korean intelligence, Kim Jong-un is the SSD director and as such, in a period of on-the-job-training. During this apparent training period, one of the three SSD vice directors, Ryu Kyong, had been arrested and executed while several of Ryu's followers were eliminated as well. Furthermore, Chu Sang-song, the Director of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS; the national police force), was also dismissed from his post for "illness."⁴⁹ On April 7, 2011, Chu was replaced by General Ri Myong-su, formerly the Director of the NDC Administration Department and Director of the KPA Operations Bureau.⁵⁰ The elimination of leaders of two of North Korea's three top internal security agencies (the Military Security Command being the other) essentially has given Kim Jong-un the opportunity to shape the SSD and the MPS and their personnel in his own fashion with the help of his uncle-in-law, Chang Song-taek. Chang, director of the Party's Administration Department that conducts administrative oversight of both agencies, no doubt aided Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un in the purging.

Reportedly, and with the help of the Party's Organization and Guidance Department, Kim Jong-un had already begun giving orders on national policies that were not under the direct control of Kim Jong-il before the older Kim passed from the scene. He has also begun receiving reports directly from the General Political Bureau regarding affairs within the KPA. This is a critical function for Kim Jong-un. As stated previously, the GPB now has the same authority inside the KPA as the KWP Central Committee, a powerful authority indeed that elevates the GPB's authority over unit commanders more than ever. Furthermore, after the Third Party Delegates Conference, most reports going to Kim Jong-il were rechanneled through Kim Jong-un at his father's direction.⁵¹ In fact, South Korea's Defense Ministry has publicly revealed that Kim Jong-Un had been active in politics and policy-making even before his father's death.⁵² At that early date, every person within the power elite, if not the country, knew that ignoring or disobeying Kim Jong-un would invite swift retribution from Kim Jong-il.

One last point about the KWP. Hyon Seong-il, one the best analysts on North Korean politics (because he was part of it before coming to South Korea), has stated, "If the binding central figure of the Suryong

weakens, the Party is the only means of preventing chaos and instability by preserving the system and counteracting the side-effects.” He further stated that if Kim Jong Il became powerless, “The Party is the only systemic structure that can resolve the issue of who will succeed him.”⁵³

The Korean Workers’ Party has six methods of controlling the Korean People’s Army.

- The Central Military Committee provides overall leadership on military policy.
- The Party Military Department provides management of policy developments and concepts of structure, equipment and strategy.
- A party committee exists at every level of the military. The KPA Party Committee reports directly to the Party Central Committee.
- The General Political Bureau controls commanders and unit members through deployment of political officers at every level down to battalions, as well as down to company level for units along the DMZ.
- The Organization and Guidance Department controls all personnel matters for KPA elite.
- Propaganda officers from the General Political Bureau provide political propaganda training for all KPA personnel at every level. These officers are assigned at every level, battalion and above, and take their instructions from the Party’s Propaganda and Agitation Department.

This overlapping structure ensures party control of the most powerful organization in North Korea and the further integration of the military into the party’s senior structures provides a seamless policy implementation for military-first politics, and will serve Kim Jong-un in his consolidation of power.

Potential for Crisis

Modeling the political dimensions of crisis in regime transition for a political system hamstrung by so many unstable factors is likely as accurate as modeling the big bang theory of the universe’s beginning.

Faced with managing a political succession process with perceived

urgency based on his own health, Kim Jong-il was challenged by his own excesses and limitations in exercising political power and governing. The fact that political terror, combined with privilege and personal reward, had worked very effectively in controlling the North's elites, this latest succession does not mean that such a system is sustainable under a leadership that may or may not balance the use of such tools deftly as by Kim Jong-il. That state resources are dwindling at a consistent rate complicates any successor's efforts at transition success. Therefore, Kim Jong-un has no choice but to continue, if not expand, the palace economy, a party-run economic effort led by the Party Secretariat's Office 39, which is separate from the state's general economy. Ultimately, Kim Jong-un must maintain resources sufficient enough to reward the power elite.⁵⁴

Kim Jong-il had everything at stake in seeing his son succeed him as a successful transition success would protect Kim Jong-il's legacy as well as that of his father, Kim Il-song. Complicating the succession process was Kim Jong-il's need to determine which combination of leaders, institutions, and processes would be optimal for success.

Considering those three variables, areas within the North Korean political-economic system with the potential for creating crisis are the power elite competition and control of the political-military reporting program, miscalculation in provocation-response-counter-response scenarios, control of the nuclear program, the economy, and Kim Jong-un's hubris. The least impacting variable is popular support and acceptance of Kim Jong-un's legitimacy. The following are assessments of instability variables that could negatively impact Kim Jong-un's ability to consolidate power.

First crisis scenario: Elite competition and control of reporting. There are those that will profit from the succession, politically, economically or both, and there are those that will not. Division of authority in the post Kim Jong-il era will separate the winners from the losers soon enough and lead to some level of crisis, much of it manageable with just the right amount of ruthless political terror. Kim Jong-un has apparently already learned that privileges balanced by purges, political violence and the threat of family imprisonment are key tools in a totalitarian dictatorship; however, sometimes knowing whom to punish is not always easy in a system where others approach the dictator in such sycophantic ways that it is not always easy to identify

friend from foe.

Chang Song-taek, Kim Kyong-hui and others have become what are called “guardians.” The intent, evidenced by promotions for these two, is apparently to raise their stature in the power structure in order to assist Kim Jong-un during the succession process. Their effectiveness in this role will depend on whether Kim Jong-un favors working through the CMC or not. To maximize their effectiveness, Kim Jong-un needs to take over as the Secretary for Organization and Guidance as soon as possible.

Furthermore, who receives and controls reporting from the party, the military and the internal security agencies is a critical factor in determining stability in the political structure based on Kim family criteria. Receiving reports keeps a player in the loop in any political system, but controlling the reporting is pure political power in a totalitarian political system. The retooling of the decision-making process after Kim Jong-il’s death leaves that process vulnerable to tinkering by power elites who think they know better than the young Kim Jong-un.

Competition between advisors will be problematic for Kim Jong-un to control. Kim Jong-il’s system of controlling the power elite with privileged carrots and draconian sticks deterred the building of factions but created competition to gain favor. There are those that claim “factions” in North Korea will challenge Kim Jong-un if he shows weakness in leadership. That sounds off the mark as nobody can name a faction by name or policy or membership within the North Korean political structure. The Kim regime’s ability to eliminate and prevent “factions” is based on the regime’s superior political, organizational and security concepts that prioritize faction deterrence. Instead, what do develop under these conditions of totalitarian control are personal lines of support where individuals tie their careers to specific successful leaders.⁵⁵ In other words, leaders develop followers who provide personal support because they think they can advance along with that leader. Social class policies in North Korea limit who these leaders are and how they develop. Being from families of the Palchisan line (anti-Japanese partisans) or the Naktong line (those who fought in the Korean War and advanced down to the Pusan Perimeter in 1950) are the privileged families who receive the lion’s share of regime benefits for loyalty to the regime. Those whose backgrounds are deemed from the hostile “songbun” class⁵⁶ can never succeed in being part of anybody’s

“line.” This does not mean factions cannot develop during times of crisis. Indeed, if there is a loss of control, or even power-sharing among the highest levels of leadership – conditions that have not existed since the late 1950’s – the development of factions is inevitable, and it will contribute to destabilizing the North’s power structure.

One of the key factors that make this a threat to the regime is the impact of resources available to support those institutions and their personnel in terms of personal financial survival. In a system of patronage, rewards are important for the senior personnel and tolerance for lower and mid-level officials to exploit the populace through limited corruption in attempts to support themselves individually. The very corruption that Kim Jong-il had been trying to prevent is essentially the way that many of the party, military, and security personnel survive.

This vicious cycle, successfully managed by Kim Jong-il before his death through his system of political terror, will continue as long as succession succeeds. Kim Jong-il established this system through ruthless methods that prevented challenges to his authority. Kim Jong-un must be willing to be just as ruthless, if not more so, as the economic situation continues to spiral downward. There will be no room for Kim Jong-un to be indecisive or to develop a conscious on redistribution of wealth beyond the elite.

The opposite side of this coin is that the succession process is a dangerous time for North Korean bureaucrats. Will local officials outside of Pyongyang follow central party directives if they are not from Kim Jong-il? When policies fail, Kim Jong-un will need to find someone to blame in order to limit the criticism he will otherwise have to face. A very recent example was the sacking of 30 officials in the North Pyongan Province party and government structures in September 2011.⁵⁷ Another example was the apparent elimination, if not the deaths of 30 North Korean officials involved in inter-Korean talks, supposedly by firing squad or traffic accidents.⁵⁸ But Kim Jong-un must be able to provide for North Korea’s “nomenklatura” – those that run the party and state at the mid-level areas of responsibility and administration. If their survival is based only on their ability to manipulate the system from below through corruption, the base of power will naturally weaken and local control will inevitably become a problem. The execution of the aforementioned “30 and 30” are indicative of this problem. Seemingly, the only way to secure a supportive nomenklatura is to improve the economy – a true challenge for Kim.

Perhaps one of the most important steps that the Kim regime took in preparing Kim the younger to assume power was the recruiting and training of Kim Jong-un's own bodyguards in the Guards Command. This bodyguard effort obviously had to advance from just protecting a family member to protecting the head of the party-state, a process that had already begun.⁵⁹

Second crisis scenario: Miscalculation. Miscalculation is most applicable, given the North Korean propensity for employing kinetic provocations to gain military, political, or economic concessions. The position of Supreme Commander, to which Kim Jong-un was appointed last December, is critical in terms of military actions as units, battalion and above, cannot maneuver or take any aggressive action without a Supreme Commander order. There is an argument that the Kim regime builds escalation control into its provocation planning and execution. Outside nuclear and missile program testing, the provocation – response – counter-response cycle is normally confined to the tactical level. But recent provocations such as the sinking of the Republic of Korea Navy's *Cheonan* corvette and the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island have pushed that level upwards and have created a new view of the North among most of the South Korean population.

Conflict in decision-making concerning the level and type of counter-response to an aggressive South Korean or Alliance response will directly impact the confidence levels between Kim Jong-un and the military. An over-reaction based on the perceived need to prove himself will likely lead to an escalatory counter-response, which, depending on its nature, could be, or lead to, a miscalculation by either or both sides.

Third crisis scenario: Nuclear program. Perhaps the most critical factor in crisis potentiality is management of the North's nuclear program, and, to a lesser extent, the North's missile program. Since all major military orders are given by the Supreme Commander through Supreme Commander's orders, and all military unit commanders are controlled by political and security officers from the General Political Bureau and the Military Security Command, nuclear and missile units and related party/civilian organizations are likely controlled in the same manner. However, it is likely that there is a more streamlined reporting system to the Supreme Commander.

Continued nuclear proliferation and nuclear cooperation with fellow rogue states such as Iran and Syria will inevitably contribute to threats against the U.S.'s staunch ally, Israel, as well as threaten stability in the Middle East. Rogue state or terrorist group use of nuclear capabilities against nuclear-capable states will inevitably lead to retaliation beyond the aggressor state that used it, but against North Korea as well if found to be the primary nuclear support behind the aggressor. We should not believe that the U.S. is the only country capable of nuclear retaliation.

But on the home front, ensuring that power elite competition does not impact the North's nuclear and missile programs will be critical to regime stability. Kim Jong-un's technical training may give him an inflated sense of confidence in nuclear and missile development courses of action. Kim the younger's management of these two programs will be measures of his leadership effectiveness as judged by military and political leaders alike. Cutbacks in the programs, though highly unlikely, should be seen as politically dangerous domestically unless tied to significant concessions from South Korea, the United States, and the international community. Indeed, North Korean nuclear negotiators have recently struck a deal with their United States counterparts for gaining food aid concessions in exchange for halting further development of its nuclear and missile programs.⁶⁰

Fourth crisis scenario: Economy. Not all efforts at building Kim Jong-un's legitimacy and reputation are going smoothly. North Korea's failing national economy has led to the depression of its industrial infrastructure, inadequacies in its agricultural system, and collapse of its food distribution and health systems. The governing philosophy of "Songun chongchi," or military-first politics, has been effective for reinforcing the ruling structure of the Kim regime, but it has contributed to irreparable damage of North Korea's general economy and threatened the health of the entire population. Regardless, considering the party-military restructuring that Kim Jong-il instituted, military-first politics is not going away. However, it should be obvious to the most casual observer that military-first politics cannot succeed in making North Korea a "kangsong taekuk," or strong and prosperous country. On the other hand, opening the economy would have disastrous consequences for the regime.

There have been problems over the past two years that have cast a negative shadow over the succession process. The November 2009

currency reform essentially wiped out the savings of most of the population. The public's surprisingly swift reaction against the reform led to purges of those related to the reform as they became scapegoats in order to ensure Kim Jong-un and the succession process were not tainted by the controversy.⁶¹ Park Nam Gi, the director of the Party Planning and Finance Department, was held responsible and executed.

Another indicator of how the failed North Korean economy is negatively impacting impressions of Kim Jong-un's leadership is the failure of the 100,000 housing unit construction effort. Won Sei-hoon, South Korea's National Intelligence Director, told the National Assembly in June 2010 that only 500 units had been completed, due to a lack of materials and power.⁶² Won Sei-hoon also testified that the failure of both North Korean currency redenomination and the failed construction of 100,000 residences in Pyongyang were "damaging perceptions of Kim Jong-un's leadership."⁶³ In a move that looks to be preparing a scapegoat if the Pyongyang Housing Construction Project's pace slows, Kim Sok-Jun, formerly the Paektusan Construction Research Institute Director, was appointed North Korea's Director of National Construction Director in September 2011.⁶⁴

The economy is a serious problem for Kim Jong-un. When Kim Jong-il took over in 1994, the economy was just beginning to fail, and, within a few years, resulted in a famine that starved 500,000 to one million people, depending on sources. Recent reports from the World Food Program and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization indicate that food shortages today are threatening another famine. There are countless reports concerning how the military is suffering greatly from malnutrition as is the general population.

Kim Jong-un must find a means to improve, not only the economy, but the health of the general population as well. Failure threatens the regime's foundations. The Kim regime's apparent preferred path to resolving economic issues lies in closer economic cooperation with China, as evidenced by Kim Jong-il's recent visits to that nation. Chinese economic support and joint projects, exploitation of regional and international efforts to feed the NK populace, and continuance of a privilege-based socio-political system keep the regime afloat. And herein lies the bottom line. The new Kim regime will need resources as much, if not more, than the old one to maintain momentum in its major military and patronage programs. The international community in general and China, South Korea and the United States specifically, will

be targets of economic exploitation through employment of provocations, charm offensives and the hope of progress in the Six Party Talks. The recent U.S. – North Korean nuclear negotiations are evidence of this.

To earn enough foreign currency to keep the regime's palace economy afloat and supportive of the regime's most important initiatives on behalf of the power elite, Kim Jong-un needs to maximize the foreign currency-earning efforts from such projects as special economic zones, the attraction of foreign assistance, and the exportation of minerals and labor.

Fifth crisis scenario: Popular support. Kim Jong-il leveraged Kim Il-song's name to a large degree during his succession and was able to do so because of the great respect the average North Korean had for Kim the elder, whose reputation was great political capital for Kim Jong-il. But Kim Jong-un is not likely to be able to use his father's name in the same fashion because most of the population, if thousands of refugee reports are to be believed, maintains fairly negative views of Kim Jong-il's rule.

The Kim family regime currently maintains order in spite of poor or non-existent services to the general population. Collective resistance action requires communication systems or processes that enable a consensus to form and effective coordination to take place. But collective efforts by the general populace in North Korea to force change are extremely difficult, if not impossible, given pervasive population control policies implemented by counterintelligence agencies. Party systems are designed to supervise the implementation of social suppression policies and eliminate anti-regime activities at every level of social organization before rebellion or subversive activities can take root and spread. To date, collective subversion efforts have been effectively squashed, leaving any organized resistance to the central government non-existent and limited to local demonstrations, and small at that. That does not mean the Kim regime is not worried about collective resistance. During the spring of 2011, the regime reclassified and resettled families with relatives in South Korea out of fear that they would receive news of the "Jasmine revolutions" in the Middle East.⁶⁵ The workers who had been sent to Libya were forced to stay in place and not evacuated as others from around the world were.⁶⁶ Their families back in North Korea found themselves victims of new suspicions.

However, there are no known reports that popular discontent threatens the regime or the succession process. Internal security agencies and the military would have to side with the people much as happened in Romania in 1989 in opposing Ceausescu. The Kim regime's control of those organizations is vastly superior and so such developments or "Jasmine revolutions" seen in the Middle East are extremely unlikely. The Kim regime has never been known to be shy in killing its own people in whatever numbers necessary.

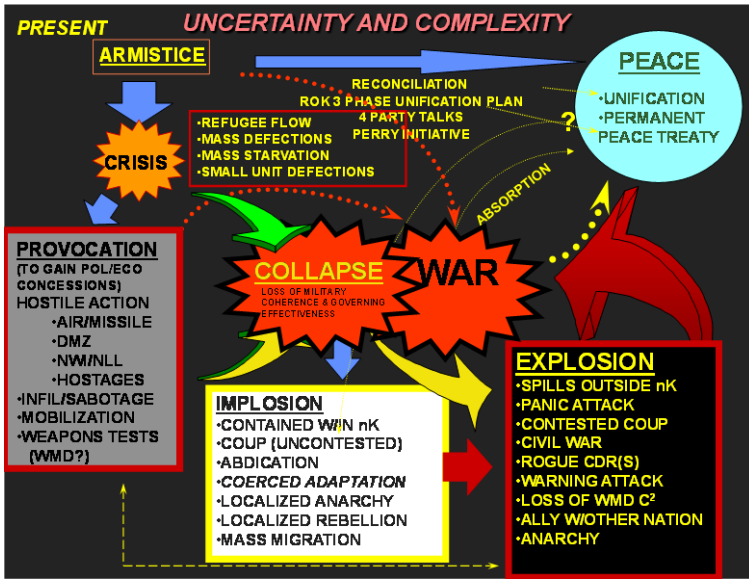
Sixth crisis scenario: Kim Jong-un's hubris and discernment. More immediate challenges for Kim Jong-un lie closer to home. Kim Jong-un's own hubris in thinking he can make critical decisions sans advice from senior personnel, or an inability to see beyond the sycophancy that dictators promote within their system, will lead to consequences that will threaten the younger Kim's ability to control the ruling system his father and grandfather built.

Most political analysts believe that Kim Jong-un's immaturity is the Achilles heel of the succession process. Kim Jong-un's ability to discern the appropriate or safe course of action from among the several he will receive will deter or exacerbate North Korean instability. Respecting the military might of the Republic of Korea – United States Alliance would be an excellent indicator of Kim Jong-un's judgment. Even Hwang Jang-yop, North Korea's highest-ranking defector, understood this fear completely. When asked, "Why hasn't North Korea attacked South Korea again since 1953?" he answered, "Because the United States has nukes, stupid!"⁶⁷

Consequences of Crisis

Modeling the collapse of the Kim family regime is difficult at best, as demonstrated in Colonel Dave Maxwell's depiction of numerous and complicated paths to uncertainty indicate in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Uncertainty and Complexity in a Destabilized North Korea⁶⁸



Will the Kim regime collapse if the succession fails? Will a split in the North Korean leadership lead to a coup d'état, or civil war? Will this enable areas outside Pyongyang to ignore central authorities? Whither North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, if central control breaks down? These are realistic concerns for the ROK-US Alliance and regional actors.

In the succession process, a coup d'état is likely to be the nearest threat to Kim Jong-un after his father's death. It is somewhat naïve to believe that if there is a coup or power struggle that it will be the last before unification of the Korean Peninsula. In the political power vacuum that is likely to follow the first coup, the power dynamics are likely to shift quickly from year to year as well as power group to power group, depending on external interference, group power assimilation skills, or just plain timing.

Every 3, 4, and 5-star general in command position will have something at stake during and after a coup, most importantly their lives. Once there is a coup d'état, they will be expected to take sides. If there is a successive coup, they may very well have to take military action on the side of whom they support. The acting director of the GPB, General Kim Jong-gak, and the commander of the Military Security Command,

General Kim Won-hung, will be in difficult and uncertain positions.

If Kim Jong-un is removed, the Korean People's Army will likely find that a new leader will purge those perceived as personal enemies or at least potential challenges to his new found authority. In that case, we can expect 10-25% of general-grade officers to be eliminated from the officer corps along with their "lines" of supporting professional officers. Such actions will be destabilizing; forecasting a civil war as a result is not a difficult assessment.

Regional Concerns

Regional actors in Northeast Asia certainly have justified concerns over whether the Kim Jong-il – Kim Jong-un transition will successfully result in Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power. First and foremost among those actors is the Republic of Korea where the people and their political leaders generally see peaceful unification as slowly slipping away, and a successful third-generation succession for the Kim regime would provide further justification for those views. While South Korean conservatives and liberals alike do not want to see a situation where North Korean succession leads to instability, or somehow implodes into large-scale provocations or even war, the two sides do see relations with the North in differing political lights, successful transition or not. The bottom line is that the assimilation of the North into the Republic of Korea is too expensive, and a cooperative and less exploitive leadership is preferred, especially if that leadership is willing to collaborate economically.

China's view of North Korean security and stability is obvious to those who pay attention to Northeast Asian security. China uses North Korea as a strategic and operational buffer from the U.S. and its political-military influence and capabilities. Stability is the focus of the Chinese as they monitor the stabilization of the new regime order.

Japan's concerns are based on threat and the Japanese citizen abduction issue, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and China's security relations with Pyongyang, all are central to these concerns. Considering the strengthening of the military relationship to the Korean Workers' Party and the placement of Kim Jong-un near the top of that relationship, Tokyo will have to find a way to solidify its missile defense posture, not only with the U.S., but with the Republic of Korea as well, in spite of political differences between the two.

Russia's efforts to develop a oil/gas pipeline through North Korea to South Korea are indicative of Moscow's priorities regarding the Korean Peninsula as a whole. But Moscow seems less concerned, openly at least, with the consequences of the Kim regime's proliferation efforts. The same cannot be said for the U.S.

Washington's concerns with North Korea go far beyond the region. While war on the peninsula (outside miscalculation) is unlikely as it serves no one's interests, it is North Korea's proliferation of its nuclear and missile technology and capabilities, particularly in the Middle East, that shape significant aspects of U.S. security policies. Even U.S. deterrence efforts in Europe are impacted where the U.S. is developing a missile defense shield designed to deter Iranian missiles developed with North Korean assistance. With the strengthened position of the North Korean military within the Kim regime, particularly in the post-succession era, continued proliferation to subsidize the regime's military R&D as well as elite lifestyles should be a basic assumption for the U.S. in its global security strategy.

Conclusion

It is important to restate that the power of Kim Jong-il was absolute, not unlike that of Adolf Hitler as the fuhrerprinzip (principle leader). His ability to craft tremendous political power from the combination of positions he assumed enabled him to achieve absolute authority at a level that Kim Jong-un will have trouble achieving. The absolute power that Kim Jong-il wielded enabled him to informalize his relationships with second and third tier leaders. Even if Kim Jong-un assumes the same positions as his father, he will find it difficult, if not impossible to establish informal relationships as part of his ruling style because of the dual requirements of total and singular control over all elements of power and maintaining decades-long relationships with elites in power positions. Establishing this type of control and such relationships with North Korean leaders is no small accomplishment and demands time, something Kim Jong-un does not have – yet.

Domestic and international factors that shaped North Korean instability 15-20 years ago have been weathered given the ruthlessness of Kim Jong-il, the effectiveness of the North's internal security agencies, and the significant largesse of South Korea, the United States and the international community in providing billions of U.S. dollars worth of aid. As a result, North Korea has evolved into a survival-at-any-cost

regional cancer that is self-destructive toward its population and a direct threat to the region, if not the world. The bottom line is that the Kim regime has not improved its chances for long-term survival.

Kim Jong-un must be prepared to present a vision. The younger Kim's advisor's will certainly be recommending what that vision will be and OGD officials will shape how the party, military and government will carry out that vision. That vision is not likely to stray far from military-first politics and will also likely carry on the "kangsong taekuk" concept of a strong and prosperous country.

There are assessments about how North Korea under Kim Jong-un can take a more liberal approach considering his Swiss education. However, he would have to ignore the role and approaches of those obviously promoted to higher positions to advise him, such as his aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, and her husband, Jang Song-taek, a man of notorious bad temperament.

As Kim Jong-un attempts to build a structure of checks and balances within the succession process, he must ensure that competition among the party and military elites for recognition does not result in destructive relationships or bitter rivalries within that structure.

Questions that remain in the succession process are:

- When will Kim Jong-un be appointed to a senior position in the National Defense Commission?
- When will Kim Jong-un be promoted to the rank of Marshal of the Republic, the same his father had prior to his death, and higher than all other officers in the KPA?
- When will Kim Jong-un be appointed to the extremely important position of Director of the State Security Department? Or will he, as his father did, have U Dong-chuk continue as the acting director?
- When will Kim Jong-un become the KWP General Secretary?
- And most importantly, when will Kim Jong-un take over the position of Secretary of the Organization and Guidance Department?

- Lastly, when will Kim Jong-un be officially referred to by all North Korean media and leaders as the “suryong,” or supreme leader?

Institutional normalcy does not guarantee regime stability. Kim Jong-il may have changed the institutional focus to a blend of the party and the military to create what he saw as a new normalcy, but regime stability is more related to authority issues than institutional preparedness. The restructuring of the Central Military Committee as a base of future power for Kim Jong-un has created personal challenges that neither we nor Kim Jong-un can understand yet. The question is, “Will the Kim Jong-un Regime be able to match the Kim Jong-il Regime’s level of authority?” If not, regime stability will suffer.

On the policy front, we should expect the Kim Jong-un regime to reestablish control of NK’s nuclear and missile programs. From the North Korean perspective, this effort will demonstrate Kim’s resolve to continue pursuance of the political-military strategy and the goals developed by Kim Jong-il. However, the gravest consequence of a successful transition of power from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un is the likelihood of continued, if not increased, proliferation of the products and technology of those two programs.

Today, the success or lack of success of the Kim Jong-un’s consolidation of power will define the parameters of regime stability. Again, both political and military planning are necessary for all regional actors to address those North Korean instability issues that will likely prove threatening individually and collectively. Preparing for those things we know to be of great political-military challenge is not required for if, but for when. The strengths of the regime – world-class counterintelligence institutions and processes, effective use of political terror, and political micro-management of personnel at every level – are also its greatest weaknesses as it destroys the population from within.

When one reviews the knowledge available about the internal political dynamics of Kim regime in general and Kim Jong-un specifically, one can see there too many assumptions and not enough intelligence. Kim Jong-un is not exactly making himself available for interviews by the international media. There are those that believe intelligence shortcomings are sufficient to thwart realistic assessments. But that does not absolve us of the responsibility to advise our senior leaders on what we can see are the obvious threats to the citizens of South Korea, the Republic of Korea-United States Alliance, the interests

of regional actors, and the concerns of the North Korean populace. Indeed, what is required is an intense review of intelligence requirements and collection methodologies relative to how North Korea will transform, peacefully or violently, during the post-Kim Jong-il era.

Notes:

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Korean Institute for Maritime Strategy.

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³ For a good discussion on this issue, see David Maxwell, “The Death of a Dictator: Danger, Opportunity or Best Timing Possible?” Small Wars Journal Blog Post, December 19, 2011. URL: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/the-death-of-a-dictator-danger-opportunity-or-best-timing-possible>.

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¹⁴ "Growing Personality Cult for Leader-In-Waiting," *Vantage Point*, Vol. 34, No.5, (Seoul; Yonhap, May 2011). p.9.

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¹⁸ Lee Seok Young, "New Kim Jong Eun Film for the Troops," *Daily NK*, September 28, 2011. URL: <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=8223>.

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