

## **China and the Korean Peninsula: Why the Problems?**

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### **Abstract**

Relations between China and North Korea are troubled and look like they will continue to deteriorate. The deterioration is largely the result of both states going through especially turbulent leadership transitions, which are changing decades-old patterns of governance. Moreover, Chinese and North Korean foreign policy goals conflict more than before, and this ensures a continued downward spiral in ties.

Keywords: China, North Korea, South Korea, United States, Russia, Korean People's Army, Korean Workers' Party, People's Liberation Army, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, Jang Song-thaek, Kim Kyong-hui, Hyon Yong-chol, Pyon In-son, Xi Jinping, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, Park Geun-hye

### ***Introduction***

China has only one formal military ally, North Korea. North Korea also has only one such ally, China. Yet relations between the two states are at an historic low and, in all probability, will deteriorate even further. At the moment, Beijing and Pyongyang look like they are barely on speaking terms.

Why? There are two principal reasons. First, both people's republics are going through especially turbulent phases. Among other things, leadership transitions are changing established patterns of governance. The disruptions to internal stability are in turn affecting their external relations.

Second, Beijing's and Pyongyang's foreign policies conflict more than in the past. As these two capitals pursue separate goals, longstanding relationships are breaking and new ones are being formed. Rapid change is becoming the dominant geopolitical theme in North Asia.

### *North Korea's Transition*

Kim Jong-il, the second in his family to rule the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), died in December 2011, apparently of a heart attack. His designated successor and son, Kim Jong-un, succeeded him.

One-man states are the least stable forms of government, and these shaky regimes are most vulnerable during leadership transitions. The transition to the third Kim generation was particularly risky for various reasons. For instance, Kim Jong-un, perhaps 28 at the time of his accession, was far too young for a Confucian society like North Korea. To compound matters, he was the youngest of Kim Jong-il's acknowledged sons and not his father's first choice.<sup>1</sup>

More important, Kim Jong-il did not have time to prepare his son for one of the most difficult positions in the world. Kim Il-sung, the first Kim leader, took more than two decades to get his son, Kim Jong-il, ready to rule. The process started sometime in the early 1960s, and by the time of the Great Leader's fatal heart attack in July 1994, his son was able to manage the transition to his benefit. When the official mourning period came to a close in 1997, Kim Jong-il had, from all appearances, consolidated his grip on power.

Kim Jong-il, however, was not as farsighted as his father. He started training Kim Jong-un a little more than two years before he died. It appears the grooming of his young son began only after his stroke, which occurred sometime in the second half of 2008.

The result is that Kim Jong-un did not have sufficient opportunity to learn the complex ways of the regime. As Bruce Bechtol, Jr. of Angelo State University has pointed out, a Kim ruler has a complex balancing act to master, keeping the three main elements of the regime—the Korean People's Army, the Korean Workers' Party, and the security services—in alignment while retaining the support of Kim family insiders.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, young Kim did not have sufficient time to put his loyalists in place, another essential task in a transition. Because Kim Jong-il realized he had started the transition process too late, he essentially appointed regents—his sister, Kim Kyong-hui, and her husband, Jang Song-thaek—to protect his son should he not be around to do so. His protectors, especially the avaricious and ambitious Jang, caused even more instability for the new ruler.

Despite all the disadvantages he inherited, most analysts thought Kim Jong-un took command over regime elements fast. For example, Choe Sang-Hun of the *New York Times* reported at the end of 2013 that Kim “has swiftly consolidated his grip.”<sup>3</sup> That opinion perhaps was based on the views of the South Korean foreign ministry, which in its white paper issued in the middle of that year stated Kim was firmly in control of the Party apparatus and the military.<sup>4</sup>

Yet there are reasons to doubt those assessments because at this time Kim Jong-un’s grip on power looks precarious, perhaps exceedingly so. For one thing, since he took over there has been almost constant change in the one institution in North Korea that matters most, the army. He has switched his army chief four times in less than four years. His father, on the other hand, replaced his chief only three times over the course of almost 18 years. As Reuters noted in May 2015, “Pyongyang’s military leadership has been in a state of perpetual reshuffle since Kim Jong-un took power.”<sup>5</sup>

The turmoil in the top ranks of the Korean People’s Army is continuing. General Hyon Yong-chol, North Korea’s defense minister, was reportedly executed at a military academy near Pyongyang around the end of April 2015. South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (NIS) stated that the general was put to death for disrespecting Kim Jong-un—snoozing at a public event—and for disobedience.<sup>6</sup>

The disclosure of Hyon’s execution attracted wide attention for many reasons, among them the gruesome method of killing—by anti-aircraft fire at close range—and the semi-public spectacle of the event—he was supposedly put to death in front of hundreds.<sup>7</sup> Yet the story took on added significance because it came soon after the reporting in February 2015 of the execution of a four-star general, Pyon In-son, probably in the preceding month but perhaps in late 2014.<sup>8</sup>

And the killings of Hyon and Pyon came amid other executions throughout the other constituencies of the regime. NIS reported 68 senior officials were killed from 2012 to 2014. In 2015, a NIS assessment released on April 29 states Kim Jong-un had ordered the execution of 15 senior officials so far that year.<sup>9</sup> In addition, it appears that other high-ranking army officers have disappeared since Hyon’s execution.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Kim Jong-il executed only 10 officials during the first four years of his rule.<sup>11</sup>

Kim Jong-un’s death toll, as high as it is, almost certainly understates the magnitude of the purge. Add in junior officials and officers, and total

deaths could be closer to 500 according to Bechtol. “Most of these executions are not public,” he notes. “Guys disappear or they end up in a camp where they die.”<sup>12</sup>

Kim Jong-un by all accounts is ruling in an “impromptu manner,”<sup>13</sup> something evident from his elimination of subordinates. The architect of the new terminal of the Pyongyang airport and five others were put to death<sup>14</sup> in late 2014 because Kim thought their design did not, in his words, “preserve the *Juche* character and national identity.”<sup>15</sup> One official was executed in January 2015 for questioning Kim Jong-un’s forestry policy. In February, an official was killed for challenging Kim’s plans to construct a building in the shape of the flower named after his grandfather Kim Il-sung. In March, a firing squad dispatched four senior members of Pyongyang’s Unhasu Orchestra.<sup>16</sup>

There may be no one immune to the bloodletting. In a May 2015 CNN interview, a defector, speaking anonymously, claimed Kim Jong-un had his aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, poisoned.<sup>17</sup> That report is speculative, but she has not been seen in public since January of that year.<sup>18</sup> Yet the most important execution is that of her husband, Jang Song-thaek.

Jang, “a traitor to the nation for all ages” as the official Korean Central News Agency called him,<sup>19</sup> was killed in December 2013, probably torn apart by large-caliber rounds. Then Kim systematically purged officials in his uncle’s vast, nationwide patronage network, killing some of them<sup>20</sup> and ordering the execution of Jang’s family members as well.<sup>21</sup>

Most foreign observers have not been especially troubled by the bloodletting. “The strategy seems to be working: There’s little sign of any real opposition to Kim’s rule among the Pyongyang elite,” wrote Andrei Lankov in May 2015.<sup>22</sup> The oft-quoted Korea watcher in Seoul at Kookmin University thinks the series of purges is a sign that the new ruler is solidifying his position by removing the disloyal.<sup>23</sup> Lankov’s view is consistent with that of the NIS, which in 2015 did not believe Kim was in any imminent difficulty because no one was opposing him.<sup>24</sup>

The majority view, however, is subject to question. “The most easily discernable sign of weakness in the power structure, or an inability to fully control a government, is purges—and in North Korea there have been plenty of them,” writes Bechtol in his latest book, *North Korea and Regional Security in the Kim Jong-un Era: A New International Security Dilemma*.<sup>25</sup>

Bechtol's general observation certainly applies to the North Korea political scene today. "What we're seeing now among his own people in both the party and in the military structure, he's clearly having problems because he keeps executing them," Victor Cha of the Center for Strategic and International Studies told CNN in May 2015. "It's been four years that we've been in this leadership transition, and a transition that lasts four years isn't a transition any more. It means that there's something seriously wrong."<sup>26</sup>

How wrong? Some North Koreans compare today's series of executions to those that preceded the fall of the Chosun Dynasty.<sup>27</sup> That could be the correct comparison because Kim, with his violent behavior, has put his regime at risk.

The problem is that Kim is not only in the midst of a seemingly never-ending transition of power, he is also trying to change the nature of Kim rule, or at least adjust the balance of the constituent elements of the regime. Kim Il-sung created a one-man system where no one element dominated politics in the DPRK, as the regime likes to call itself. These elements all kept each other in check, surveilling, reporting on, and challenging each other. Founder Kim perfected the art of keeping everything revolving around himself—and everything in balance.

Kim Jong-il was far weaker than his father and as a result needed to create a power base to call his own. He did that the fast way by letting the military take on a more prominent role, allowing generals and admirals to elbow the Korean Workers' Party and even the security services to the sidelines. That, in a nutshell, is the concept behind Kim Jong-il's iteration of *songun*, the military-first policy.

Jang Song-thaek, young Kim Jong-un's regent, restored balance, fast bringing the Party back to its traditional position. Yet as he did that, he took from the flag officers' streams of income from, among other things, exports. There are many theories as to why Kim Jong-un ordered Uncle Jang killed, but one of them is that the army wanted its money—along with power and prestige—back and forced Kim to get rid of Jang. In fact, the military looks like it has been getting a slightly larger share of the nation's resources since then.

Yet the fight over cash does not appear to be over. Kim Jong-un, as he struggles to gain control over the flag officers, is trying to "wrest the vast trade and other economic rights the military accumulated under his father and restore them to the cabinet."<sup>28</sup>

As Cho Han-beom of the Korea Institute for National Unification notes, Kim has purged relatively few from either the Korean Workers' Party or the Ministry of State Security.<sup>29</sup> This suggests the deadly game of regime politics will continue to be centered at the top of the Korean People's Army, where generals and admirals are bound to resist attempts to deemphasize *songun* policies.<sup>30</sup> "Kim Jong-un may have felt a need to suppress discontent and skepticism rising within the military elites about his rule by making an example out of their minister, General Hyon," Kim Dong-yup told the *New York Times*. "This may be the beginning of a new round of disciplining the military."<sup>31</sup>

Further deadly disagreements between the Kim family and the country's most powerful institution cannot be good for the DPRK. So far, Kim has been able to prevail by employing divide-and-rule tactics, but the constant turnover also means he has not been able to find a flag officer he can trust. He is, after all, searching for some four-star willing to act against the interests of the military, and that is a tall order. Not even the threat of death seems to have worked for him in this regard.

And the resort to the ultimate punishment puts Kim at risk. As was evident from Stalin's Soviet Union, the spilling of blood creates a dynamic that is hard to stop. The act of killing of course intimidates others, but it also creates enemies, who then have to be eliminated. Blood, after all, demands blood.

Moreover, murderous leaders provide incentives to subordinates to fight back. Anyone under suspicion knows that the alternatives to almost-certain execution are either fleeing North Korea<sup>32</sup> or killing Kim. No surprise then that the pace of executions appears to be increasing recently. Kim's "reign of extreme terror"<sup>33</sup>—the phrase used by South Korean President Park Geun-hye in May 2015—has worked up to now, but even those who believe the DPRK is stable see trouble soon. Koh Yu-hwan of Dongguk University in Seoul, for instance, believes the regime could "reach its limit" if purges go on.<sup>34</sup>

That conclusion seems correct. The National Intelligence Service has noted that senior leaders in Pyongyang doubt Kim's "governing style."<sup>35</sup> Ordinary North Koreans are turning away from Kim because, among other reasons, of the continued killings. As one source in South Pyongan province told the Daily NK site, "People say that considering the fact that Kim had executed dozens of high-ranking officials within the few years since coming to power, 'there's no hope left.'"<sup>36</sup>

The apparent loss of support at all levels of society is one reason Kim Jong-un, despite four years at the apex of political power, may be no more secure than the day he took over after the unexpected death of his father. At no time since 1949, one year after the founding of the DPRK, has a Kim ruler had less support than Kim Jong-un does today.<sup>37</sup>

Given the instability in Pyongyang, North Korea is no position to deal with other nations in good faith, and that includes new friends, like Russia. Kim Jong-un did not go to Moscow for the commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of Second World War as he was widely expected to do. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov chalked that up to “Korea’s internal affairs,”<sup>38</sup> and that sounds correct. Kim was apparently so insecure that he felt he could not leave his country; worse, it appears he is also not confident enough to travel to large parts of the DPRK.<sup>39</sup>

And Kim has not been able to maintain friendly relations with China. Tellingly, he has not traveled there as North Korea’s leader.

### ***China’s Transition***

Purges in Pyongyang are being matched by purges in Beijing. China’s political system, also undergoing an historic leadership transition, is in a state of flux and almost certainly unstable.

That’s not what most analysts think. The dominant narrative, today as well as in past years, is that Xi Jinping quickly consolidated his political position after becoming the Communist Party’s general secretary in November 2012. In June 2013, both the *New York Times*<sup>40</sup> and the *Wall Street Journal*,<sup>41</sup> on the eve of his “shirtsleeves summit” with President Obama, reported that administration officials had determined that Xi had asserted control over the Party apparatus and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) much faster than anticipated.

On the surface, the transfer of power from Fourth Generation supremo Hu Jintao to the Fifth Generation Xi has proceeded without incident, and that is all the more an accomplishment because it is the first leadership transition in the history of the People’s Republic not engineered by Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong’s successor. Deng, after quickly disposing of the hapless Hua Guofeng, chose himself, and then he picked both Jiang Zemin to succeed him and Hu to follow Jiang. Deng was in no position, however, to make a selection for the top spot in the post-Hu leadership team.

China experts believe the transition from Hu to Xi has been governed by the Party’s internal rules and procedures and has thus proceeded in

“smooth” fashion. Yet there have been, in reality, severe problems. In a one-party state, even one as bureaucratized as China, regulations change with the whim of leaders, and in this Hu-Xi transition there have been disruptions.

By far, the biggest disruption is the wide ranging prosecution of both high- and low-level officials, “tigers” and “flies” in Beijing lingo. New Chinese Communist leaders have always engaged in some housecleaning, but Xi Jinping’s efforts have been unprecedented in scope and duration.

Under the guise of a campaign against corruption, Xi has promoted what John Minnich of Stratfor has called “the broadest and deepest effort to purge, reorganize, and rectify the Communist Party leadership since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the rise of Deng Xiaoping two years later.”<sup>42</sup> The unprecedented prosecution of others threatens the basis of Party rule by “deconstructing” the web of patronage relationships that keeps that organization in power.<sup>43</sup>

Xi’s relentless campaign has been generally viewed as proof that he dominates the political landscape. As the *Wall Street Journal*’s Andrew Browne wrote in August 2014, “So far at least, there’s little sign of resistance.”<sup>44</sup> Yet as in North Korea, purges in China are, in reality, a sign of continued weakness of its leader, not his strength. If he were as strong as many believe, why would there be need for more purges?

Xi has roiled the political system, breaking norms designed to ensure stability. The incarceration of former internal security czar Zhou Yongkang after a secret trial in May 2015, for instance, violates the Party’s generation-old taboo prohibiting prosecutions of members or former members of the Politburo Standing Committee. If leaders knew they would not be hunted down, as they were in the Maoist period, they would be more inclined to withdraw quietly after losing political struggles. In other words, Deng Xiaoping, Mao’s crafty successor, reduced the incentive for political figures to fight to the end and possibly tear the Communist Party apart. As such, the prohibition against prosecution was an important element in restoring a sense of order in the Chinese political system.

Xi Jinping, however, is reversing the process and upping the stakes, something evident in the life imprisonment of both Zhou, the most senior official purged since the Maoist period, and Bo Xilai, a former Party official allied with Zhou and others Xi considered threats. Those jailings are signs China is returning to a period that many thought was long past. During the mostly permissive Deng, Jiang, and Hu eras, powerbrokers



tried to maintain a delicate balance among the Party's competing and shifting factions, groups, and coalitions. Xi's motto, however, is "You die, I live."<sup>45</sup>

As Renmin University's Zhang Ming says, "combat" between Xi and others "has been white-hot."<sup>46</sup> Xi is forcing his opponents to fight hard to protect themselves, their patronage networks, and their families, and therefore his unprecedented action probably marks the end of a two-decade period of stability, a time that permitted China to recover from Mao's disastrous 27 years of rule and the disruptive Beijing Spring of 1989. The question going forward, therefore, is whether intra-organization fighting in the future will be constrained by Party rules and played out within established bounds.

Xi, however, has made it clear he will not let norms prevent him from realizing his outsized ambitions. Every leader of the People's Republic has been weaker than his predecessor—except Xi. Xi, unlike his predecessors, obviously has nurtured hopes and dreams Mao-like in their scope and grandeur, and that has led him, more than his three immediate predecessors, to eliminate political opponents.

Mr. Xi has openly scorned Mikhail Gorbachev, but like the last Soviet leader he is a figure wanting to accomplish great deeds in reforming—saving—an ailing system. And also like Gorbachev, Xi has started something he cannot control.

In recent developments, Xi has gone after both his predecessors, the only Communist Party supremos still alive. Ling Jihua, Hu Jintao's right-hand man, was placed under investigation by the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection in late 2014 for "suspected serious disciplinary violations"—code for corruption<sup>47</sup>—and formally arrested in July 2015.<sup>48</sup> And the CCDI apparently detained Zeng Qinghong sometime in early 2015.<sup>49</sup> The investigation is widely thought to be an attempt to undermine Zeng's patron, Jiang Zemin, and it begins the next phase of political struggle. Not only does the targeting of Zeng represent the breaking of time-honored understandings, it also is an escalation in Xi tactics. The new leader is now turning on erstwhile allies: Zeng is believed to have arranged Xi's accession to the apex of political power in 2012.

The infighting could get ugly as Xi is removing incentives to preserve unity. As most top political figures have much to hide—the *Wall Street Journal* noted in June 2015 that "all of China's recent leaders have enriched themselves and their relatives"<sup>50</sup>—the infighting can last a

long time, and now many believe Xi cannot end his campaign. If he were to do so, those aggrieved by prior prosecutions would almost surely retaliate. “What Xi is doing is, to put it mildly, disliked by the establishment, particularly retired standing committee members,” says Steve Tsang of the University of Nottingham. “If Xi stumbles, the knives will be out for him.”<sup>51</sup>

Like in Kim Jong-un’s North Korea—and Mao’s China—Xi’s logic is that there can be no stopping until no one else is left standing. As a practical matter, his war on political opponents is never-ending.

Xi’s all-out assault is perhaps best illustrated by his attack on factionalism, launched at the December 2014 meeting of the Politburo.<sup>52</sup> In its history, the Communist Party has had many gangs, cliques, circles, and factions, but Xi made a play to banish this perceived evil.

In one sense, there is nothing new to the attack on factions. After the turbulent Maoist years, Deng Xiaoping did away with factional discourse. But Deng, for all his efforts, did not eliminate either factions or intra-party struggle. Groups continued to form, operate, fight each other, and break apart. He only muted contention, and that had the effect of pushing disagreement out of sight, at least some of the time.

In another context, however, the attack on factionalism is of great concern because Xi came to power in unusual circumstances. In a faction-ridden Communist Party, he leads no faction. People say he heads the “Princelings,” but that term merely describes sons and daughters of either former leaders or high officials. These offspring have views that span the political spectrum and do not form a cohesive group. Xi became China’s supreme leader because he appealed to all factions, in large part because he was not identified with any one of them. Therefore, he was the least unacceptable choice at the time.

Once he reached the top, however, Xi apparently felt vulnerable without a faction, especially in a system ridden with them. So, in reality, Xi’s move against factionalism represents an attack on everyone else’s group. But in the process of launching such a broad-based initiative, Comrade Jinping put his contemporaries on edge and managed to unite against him his two immediate predecessors, long-time rivals to each other. Jiang Zemin and his Shanghai Gang faction and Hu Jintao and his Communist Youth League faction are now, for the first time ever, working with common purpose. So the factions that are not supposed to exist are ganging up on Xi Jinping.<sup>53</sup>

At this moment, the Communist Party looks like it is headed to

another round of debilitating leadership struggle. The ferocity of the struggle is approaching that of Maoist times, something evident from the series of rumors of coup plots and assassination attempts, especially in the first months of 2012 on the eve of Xi taking power,<sup>54</sup> and again in 2014 and 2015.<sup>55</sup> These rumors, for the most part, looked false, but clearly something was—and still is—amiss in elite circles.

The fact that terrified and desperate political players are continually spreading stories of armored cars in the center of Beijing and gunfire in the Communist Party leadership compound of Zhongnanhai means groups are trying to destabilize Xi's regime. That is the turbulent environment in which stories start, circulate, and take on a life of their own. Xi, in short, has created a situation in which people believe—probably correctly—that they have no choice but to fight.

As civilians fight, senior officers of the People's Liberation Army seem to have gained significant political influence. The dominant narrative is that Xi took quick control of the military after being named Party general secretary. At the time, he also became Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, and as such the leader of the PLA.

Observers have pointed to the series of loyalty oaths made by generals and admirals in 2014 as proof of his consolidation of authority over the military,<sup>56</sup> and some like veteran China watcher Willy Lam of the Chinese University of Hong Kong believe that the military has become his faction in the Party or at least the core of his support. Lam also notes that the core of the core is the PLA's Nanjing Military Region. Xi served in Party posts located in that district and as China's leader has favored its officers with high-profile promotions.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Xi is also thought to have support among the so-called Princeling general officers.<sup>58</sup>

The notion that Xi controls the military is incomplete, however. For one thing, China's leader has alienated hundreds of mid- to senior-level officers with both his purges of top generals and his concentration of promotions among select groups.

The resulting resentment looks like it has affected discipline. For instance, officers in the Lanzhou Military Region openly defied Xi—and may have attempted to embarrass him—during his good will trip to India in September 2014 by ordering a large-scale incursion into Indian territory.<sup>59</sup> PLA watcher I-chung Lai of The Taiwan Thinktank has raised the possibility that the border incident was the work of officers loyal to Bo Xilai, the former Party secretary of Chongqing and adversary

of Xi, as part of a wider political struggle against the Chinese leader.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, elements of the PLA loyal to former leader Jiang Zemin reportedly were behind terrorist raids in northeast India, especially one involving the killing of about 18 Indian troopers in June 2015 in Manipur.<sup>61</sup>

Xi now relies on his favored officers to maintain his influence over the PLA, and that makes them extraordinarily powerful. Therefore, his favored general officers are gaining power over all realms of policy and even society.<sup>62</sup> For instance, the declaration of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone in November 2013, long resisted by predecessor Hu Jintao, looks like a case where certain officers pushed Xi around to get what they wanted.<sup>63</sup>

Since Xi has taken over as China's leader, there has been an unmistakable air of assertion in the senior ranks of the Chinese military, as flag officers and senior colonels have increasingly been making comments on diplomatic and national security matters. In fact, there has been a wider participation of military officers in decision-making bodies, especially the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group and the newly formed Central National Security Commission. "If actors of warfare are seen as saviors of China and custodians of the quintessence of Chinese civilization," writes Willy Lam, "the status of generals as decision-makers in foreign and national security policies will inevitably be enhanced."<sup>64</sup> And flag officers are not letting the opportunity go by as they make their "military diplomacy" the diplomacy of the country.

One can argue that Xi Jinping is an ardent nationalist and there is a congruence in his views and those of his senior officers. For instance, the "Chinese dream," Xi's signature phrase, is implicitly militant. There is a measure of truth to this contention, but on balance it seems more likely that the generals and admirals are pushing Xi than he is pushing them. Kenneth Lieberthal of the Brookings Institution, a close observer of China, suggests that Xi has to follow the top brass in order to build support for his programs.<sup>65</sup> Xi's constant admonitions to the flag officers that they are subordinate to the Party—unnecessary if he were fully in command as most everyone assumes—indicate the generals and admirals are confident in their power and, at least most of the time, may not have to answer to anyone but themselves.

So in the Chinese "political ecology," as the venerable Alice Miller of the Hoover Institution puts it, Xi looks like he is having difficulty exercising control over the Communist Party, including its large army.

This apparent disunity complicates policymaking and decreases the effectiveness of Beijing's responses to North Korea. As such, China's political distress almost certainly exacerbates the recent difficulties Beijing has experienced with Pyongyang.

### *Consequences of North Korean and Chinese Disunity*

Why do we care about disunity at the top of both the Chinese and North Korean political systems? It is no coincidence that, as both regimes have descended into internal political turmoil, relations between them have deteriorated. Of course, not all the recent troubles between the two people's republics are the result of this strife, but leaders in both states now appear to be focused on their challenges at home and not on improving ties with the other.

North Korea is the straw that stirs this particular drink, dictating events. The observable cooling of relations started there, ostensibly with the execution of Jang Song-thaek. When the Kim regime unexpectedly gave wide publicity to Jang's execution, state media justified the killing in part on his relations with Beijing. Indirectly, the Chinese were referred to as "enemies."<sup>66</sup>

Jang's apparently swift downfall and execution resulted in a sharp deterioration of diplomatic ties between the two states, largely because Kim Jong-un had entrusted Jang with responsibility for relations with the DPRK's large neighbor to the north. His death and the grisly dismantlement of his loyalist network resulted in the cutting off of day-to-day dealings with Chinese diplomats and officials. The breaking of ties was then followed by vituperative anti-Chinese propaganda from Pyongyang.

On the surface, military relations also suffered. For instance, in the months after Jang's execution the Korean People's Army began "ratcheting up" name calling, labeling China a "sworn enemy."<sup>67</sup> That denunciation followed Kim Jong-un ordering the Kang Kon Military Academy, the training ground for the country's top officers, to hang signs with a quote from his grandfather that China is a "turncoat and our enemy."<sup>68</sup> And if Beijing did not get the message, the North Korean military then began painting images of pandas, a symbol of China, on targets.<sup>69</sup>

More significantly, the Korean People's Army is reported to have moved 80 tanks to its 12<sup>th</sup> Corps, in Ryanggang province, near the Chinese border, and probably sent 80 armored vehicles a short time after.

The corps was formed in 2010 to defend against a Chinese invasion, and the transfer is believed to be the first deployment of tanks to the area.<sup>70</sup>

Yet despite all the evident hostility and posturing, it had appeared that military-to-military dealings mostly remained in place, even if the cooperation was out of sight at times. There are recent hints, however, that contacts between the two people's armies have begun to erode even further. For instance, it is reported that General Pyon In-son was executed for refusing Kim Jong-un's orders to replace subordinate officers in charge of relations with China.<sup>71</sup>

Both Kim's father and grandfather, while maintaining normal diplomatic relations with Beijing, fired generals perceived as being too close to their Chinese counterparts. Kim Jong-un, however, has simultaneously downgraded diplomatic and military ties, something not seen in a long while, and he is using the ultimate penalty to punish those wishing to preserve some contact.

Mil-to-mil dealings have been the one stabilizing element between the two countries, especially because the DPRK is one of the world's most militarized states. So a deep rupture in relations between the People's Liberation Army and the Korean People's Army will, in all probability, have significant and lasting effects.

Donald Kirk, the widely followed North Korea watcher, has written that internal strife in Pyongyang has often had little effect on relations with Beijing.<sup>72</sup> That perceptive assessment, however, may no longer be valid because the insecure Kim leader, relying on his family's decades-old playbook, has identified an enemy, with China filling that role this time. So what appears to be intensified infighting in Pyongyang looks like the primary cause of the downward spiral in ties.

Kim Jong-un has shown no signs of letting up on the campaign against the Chinese, snubbing them at every opportunity he gets. For instance, Xi Jinping's congratulatory message on the 66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the DPRK in September 2014 was printed on page 3 of *Rodong Sinmun*. President Vladimir Putin's message, on the other hand, appeared on page 1.<sup>73</sup> China was pointedly not invited to the ceremony marking the end of the mourning period for Kim Jong-il in December of that year.<sup>74</sup>

Slightings like these are creating friction with China. That friction, in turn, makes it difficult for Beijing to exercise a stabilizing influence on the DPRK.

For decades, the Chinese, for good or ill, were actively working with

Kim family rulers. At the moment, however, their policy toward Korea looks unusually passive.

This passivity looks to be a result of Beijing's exasperation with Kim, evident from most every Chinese analysis in the public domain. Many term this "North Korea fatigue,"<sup>75</sup> and it is also obvious in almost every other capital that has had dealings with Pyongyang. As American diplomat Stapleton Roy said more than a decade ago, "No one has found a way to persuade North Korea to move in sensible directions,"<sup>76</sup> and not much has changed since then in this regard. The Chinese, who have been dealing with the North Koreans from the founding of the DPRK, look more fatigued than most. After all, they have supported the Kims with aid and trade for decades and seem to have almost no influence for all their treasure spent and time devoted.<sup>77</sup>

China's new passive approach—it's hard to dignify it by terming it a policy—is not due to a lack of concern. To the contrary, there appears to be in Beijing a realization of the danger posed by an unstable neighbor possessing the world's most destructive weapons. As South Korea's President Park Geun-hye said in June 2015 to the *Washington Post*, "President Xi firmly adheres to the position that he will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea" because "if we let the ongoing enhancement of North Korea's nuclear weapons continue, eventually we will face a situation that will be beyond our control."<sup>78</sup>

This absence of a coherent Chinese policy toward North Korea,<sup>79</sup> even in the face of its heightened perception of danger, could be rooted in the apparent political disunity in Beijing. First, policy elites are undoubtedly distracted by the infighting among civilian figures. This infighting, it appears, is resulting in a neglect of North Korea and indecision. Neglect and indecision are beginning to look like policy paralysis.

Second, even if some want to try to fix ties, the Chinese military could be standing in the way.

China's top brass is known to have views supporting Pyongyang—the relations between Chinese and North Korean officers are said to be "forged in blood," bound by shared outlook, and strengthened by commercial dealings—and so in the past generals blocked new policy approaches that seriously undermined the Kimist state. The People's Liberation Army already had a special say on Korean matters—due to the heavy losses it suffered during the Korean War—but its ascendancy resulting from the squabbling among civilians has strengthened its hand

generally.

The military's emergence as the most powerful faction in the Communist Party, a trend beginning in the last decade, may now give flag officers in some instances a veto over policy toward the Kim regime. The generals and admirals exercised a veto after the North torpedoed the *Cheonan*, a South Korean frigate, in March 2010, and shelled Yeonpyeong Island the following November. Despite the heavy loss of life—50 South Koreans were killed in the two incidents—Beijing did not join the condemnation of the Kim regime because the PLA refused to back any change in policy.<sup>80</sup>

The military's conservative posture, therefore, has provided stability to China-North Korea relations. This stability, however, is threatened. After all, Kim Jong-un's determined efforts to break this vital military-to-military link will surely have consequences. One possible consequence is that China's senior officers will lose their special position in Beijing due to their perceived loss of influence in Pyongyang. Moreover, Kim's anti-China posturing could strengthen the hand of senior PLA officers who would like their country to distance itself from the DPRK.<sup>81</sup>

In any event, an erosion of stability in China's Communist Party is occurring while Beijing is losing its ability to deal with a North Korea made volatile by infighting of the worst sort. These two developments are surely connected, although we may not know the precise relationship for some time.

### ***Conflicting North Korean and Chinese Foreign Policies***

The relationship between North Korea and China is quickly breaking down not only because of their respective internal problems but also because Pyongyang's and Beijing's foreign policy goals now undercut each other. There are three principal areas to consider in this regard.

First, China has been trying to develop economic and other ties with South Korea, what is now called Beijing's "tilt" toward Seoul. As John Delury of Yonsei University has noted, Beijing thought its nod toward South Korea would encourage Kim to become compliant, in order to prevent China from further drifting to the side of his mortal enemy, the other Korean state.<sup>82</sup>

This effort is proceeding well from Beijing's perspective. Xi Jinping's trip to Seoul in July 2014, for instance, was the first time a Chinese leader visited South Korea before the North. Xi has yet to go to



North Korea as China's leader.

Yet, despite what Chinese diplomats may think, China's strategy is running into trouble. Kim Jong-un countered by playing a similar game by courting Russia. In fact, Kim's strategy seems to be working as some Chinese academics think their country should try to "repair the house before it rains,"<sup>83</sup> in other words, fix relations with North Korea, to among other things, keep Russia away from the Korean peninsula.

In any event, the new Chinese diplomacy is causing friction with Pyongyang. Even though China's outreach to South Korea is in reaction to North Korea's cutoff of ties with Beijing, the Chinese attempt is viewed by Pyongyang as nothing short of betrayal. The Kim family, since the formation of the North Korean state in 1948, has had one overarching goal: to rule the entire peninsula. Indeed, the DPRK's unshakable determination—its mission—to unify the Korean nation is the fundamental basis of the Kim family's legitimacy.

Therefore, as long as descendants of Kim Il-sung run a separate Korean state, the likelihood of a durable peace in North Asia is remote. A strong North Korea will use its power to try to absorb the Republic of Korea, and a weak North will use violence to upset status quos it finds unacceptable. Of course, China, with its new Korean peninsula diplomacy, now stands in the way of the realization of that mission.

Second, the North's nuclear arsenal is one of the critical props for the regime, yet that arsenal creates disagreements with China, "its essential benefactor."<sup>84</sup>

The North's nukes not only reduce China's leverage over Pyongyang but also undermine Beijing's interests by encouraging Washington to move forces to the region. Pyongyang's weapons also strengthen the case for missile defense in Japan and South Korea and push Japan to remilitarize. The Chinese, to keep the North Korean nuclear program in the box, could be forced to further reduce material assistance, and this would, perhaps for the first time, jeopardize Kim rule.

Young Kim Jong-un is insistent on keeping his nukes, but he also needs substantially more aid to conduct his *byungjin* line—"progress in tandem"—policy of developing the economy and nuclear weapons at the same time. China, for its own reasons, is not on board with this approach.

Third, the North Korean state looks like it is entering another period of vulnerability, and this also raises tensions between Pyongyang and Beijing. Some say that should the North look like it will collapse, China's military could march south, establish order, and either annex the

DPRK or attempt to arrange a compliant ruling group in Pyongyang. Korea would, once again, fall into China's lap, substantially strengthening Beijing's position in Asia. Shi Yinhong, the oft-quoted Chinese international relations analyst, has argued the DPRK's failure would advance Chinese interests as a newly-unified Korea would move closer to China and distance itself even further from Japan. Furthermore, Seoul would then see no need for American troops on Korean soil.<sup>85</sup>

The stability of the North Korean state has been in question since the late 1980s or early 1990s, but it has always survived. "Almost twenty years later, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is still there and those predicting its imminent collapse have continually been proven wrong," writes Jamie Metzl of the Atlantic Council in "Doomsday: The Coming Collapse of North Korea." "But today, the North Korean madness may well be nearing its endgame."<sup>86</sup>

Although the North is far from reaching the final of the seven stages outlined by defense analyst Bob Collins,<sup>87</sup> there is growing concern about the ability of the Kim regime to sustain itself. The Bank of Korea, the South Korean central bank, estimates that the North has been averaging about 1% growth in recent years,<sup>88</sup> but it looks as if the country will not be able to keep up even that meagre pace because of the ongoing drought, which could make 2015 another time of extreme hardship. Pyongyang says the water shortage is the worst in a century.

More important from a regime stability point of view, the downturn in the so-called "royal economy" looks serious. There are reports that the Kim family is not taking care of its own as it once did. "Events that used to be punctuated with gifts, for example, have given way to expressions of appreciation" notes Ken Gause of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.<sup>89</sup> Apparently, Kim family sources of income are declining, and Joshua Stanton of the One Free Korea site reports that Kim Jong-un may be drawing down his offshore cash and gold reserves. "He doesn't have the resources to be able to consolidate his power and buy relationships," Gause notes.<sup>90</sup>

So at this moment, Kim Jong-un is searching for cash. Neither South Korea nor the United States appears inclined to rescue him, and the same is true for the Kremlin, even though Moscow is "looking east"<sup>91</sup> and Russia and North Korea have declared 2015 to be a "year of friendship."<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, for Kim, he has little to offer the Russians, so they are not going to support him to any great extent.<sup>93</sup> In 2014, Moscow ratified the writing off of almost \$10 billion of Soviet-era

uncollectable loans<sup>94</sup> and made promises, but the Kremlin does not appear to be providing much in fresh assistance.

As a practical matter, the only country that can help Kim is China. The relationship between the two nations, despite the current freeze, is deep. North Korea's trade with the People's Republic—about \$6.5 billion annually—is 60 times more than its trade with Russia, which amounted to about \$113 million at last count.<sup>95</sup> Beijing is also supplying aid, although the full extent of it is even less known than in the past. The Chinese have often reduced material assistance to make a point, as they are undoubtedly doing now, but so far they have not put the North Korean state at risk by withdrawing all support. Says James Person of the Wilson Center: "In the past decade or so, the North Koreans have been more dependent on China than they've been dependent on any country in their history."<sup>96</sup> The North resents its dependence, and the friction is bound to get worse in coming years.

The Kim regime, consequently, appears to be entering another especially difficult period, and it will blame Beijing, which is, for the first time, realizing how serious the situation on the Korean peninsula has become.

North Korea's need for aid and the lack of donors create an unstable situation. In the past, the North has roiled North Asia when it has demanded assistance. It is bound to do so again. China may or may not be a status quo power in that region, but Beijing will not like Pyongyang's attempts to extract assistance with increasingly provocative acts.

### ***Conclusion***

In one sense, the international community has a stake in Beijing's clout in North Korea. Why? The Korean policies of many countries have long been based on China solving Pyongyang-caused problems.

For instance, at the beginning of the last decade Washington looked to Beijing to broker an end to the North Korean nuclear weapons program. Others have hoped the Chinese would help unify the two Koreas.

It has never been clear that Beijing wanted to promote solutions favored by the international community, but now there is a recognition that China did not in fact have sufficient influence in Pyongyang and will not, at least for the foreseeable future, be able to move North Korea in better directions.

Turmoil in both capitals, among other reasons, ensures that China will not be part of solutions for years to come.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Jong Il's first choice, eldest acknowledged son Kim Jong Nam, lost favor after he was detained in May 2001 for trying to enter Japan on a fake Dominican passport.

<sup>2</sup> "We've seen such a complete changeover in the personnel in the three key institutions—the Party, the military, and the security services—and this is all in a scramble for Kim Jong Un to consolidate his power," said Bruce Bechtol in a radio interview in 2015. See Bruce Bechtol, interview by John Batchelor and Gordon Chang, *The John Batchelor Show*, Cumulus Media Network, May 13, 2015, <http://johnbatchelorshow.com/podcasts/thurs-51315-hr-2-jbs-co-host-gordon-chang-forbescom-henry-navarro-university-california>.

<sup>3</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "Uncle of North Korean Leader Stripped of Power, According to Reports," *New York Times*, December 3, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/04/world/asia/uncle-of-north-korean-leader-stripped-of-power-according-to-reports.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/04/world/asia/uncle-of-north-korean-leader-stripped-of-power-according-to-reports.html?_r=0).

<sup>4</sup> See "N. Korea's Kim Jong-un Has Stably Consolidated Power: South Diplomatic Paper," Yonhap News Agency, August 16, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/yonhap-news-agency/130816/n-koreas-kim-jong-un-has-stably-consolidated-power-south-dip>.

<sup>5</sup> Ju-min Park and James Pearson, "North Korea Executes Defense Chief with an Anti-Aircraft Gun: South Korea Agency," Reuters, May 14, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/14/us-northkorea-purgeidUSKBN0NY01J20150514>.

<sup>6</sup> See "N.Korea Confirms Execution of Army Chief," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), June 15, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/06/15/2015061501311.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/06/15/2015061501311.html). Some have doubted the initial reports that Hyon was put to death. See, e.g., Sue Chang, "Satellite Image May Hold Clue to North Korea Defense Minister's Reported Execution," Market Watch, May 14, 2015, <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/satellite-image-may-hold-clue-to-n-korea-execution-2015-05-14>; Choe Sang-Hun, "Some Doubt That North Korea Executed a Top General," *New York Times*, May 13, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/world/asia/some-doubt-that-north-korea-executed-a-top-general.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/14/world/asia/some-doubt-that-north-korea-executed-a-top-general.html?_r=0). Hyon has not been seen in public, and there are reports he has been replaced by Pak Yong Sik. See "Kim Jong-un May Have Appointed New Defense Chief," Yonhap News Agency, June 5, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/>

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2015/06/05/0200000000AEN20150605001600315.html?input=rss. Furthermore, there is other evidence suggesting Hyon is dead. See, e.g., Choi Song Min, "Hyon's Execution Referenced in NK Lecture," Daily NK, May 15, 2015, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/m/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=13191>.

<sup>7</sup> See Park and Pearson, "North Korea Executes Defense Chief with an Anti-Aircraft Gun: South Korea Agency."

<sup>8</sup> See Sam Kim, "In Latest Purge, Kim Jong Un Executes Army General," Bloomberg Business, February 4, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-04/in-latest-purge-kim-jong-un-executes-army-general>.

<sup>9</sup> See Don Melvin and K. J. Kwon, "S. Korea Lawmaker: North Korea Leader Executes About 15 Officials in 2015," CNN, April 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/29/world/north-korea-executions/>.

<sup>10</sup> See "N.Korea Confirms Execution of Army Chief."

<sup>11</sup> See Kang Seung-woo, "NK Shudders Under Reign of Terror," *Korea Times* (Seoul), May 13, 2015, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/05/116\\_178889.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/05/116_178889.html).

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Bechtol, interview by John Batchelor and Gordon Chang, *The John Batchelor Show*, Cumulus Media Network, May 13, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Melvin and Kwon, "S. Korea Lawmaker: North Korea Leader Executes About 15 Officials in 2015."

<sup>14</sup> See Jeff Stone, "North Korea Leader Kim Jong Un Likely Executed Architect Before Unveiling Shiny New Pyongyang Airport," *International Business Times*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/north-korea-leader-kim-jong-un-likely-executed-architect-unveiling-shiny-new-1986785>; Lee Yong-jong and Ser Myoja, "Confidants of Jong-un Disappearing," *JoongAng Daily* (Seoul), October 23, 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2996394>.

<sup>15</sup> "Kim Jong Un Gives Field Guidance to Construction Site of Pyongyang International Airport," Korean Central News Agency, November 1, 2014, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2014/201411/news01/20141101-01ee.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See Melvin and Kwon, "S. Korea Lawmaker: North Korea Leader Executes About 15 Officials in 2015."

<sup>17</sup> See Paula Hancocks, "North Korean Leader Ordered Aunt to Be Poisoned, Defector Says," CNN, May 12, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/11/asia/north-korea-kim-aunt-poisoned/>.

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<sup>18</sup> See Lim Yun Suk, “South Korea Says North Executed Defense Minister with Anti-Aircraft Fire,” Channel News Asia, May 13, 2015, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/south-korea-says-north/1843262.html>.

<sup>19</sup> “Traitor Jang Song Thaek Executed,” Korean Central News Agency, December 13, 2013, <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201312/news13/20131213-05ee.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See Julian Ryall, “North Korea Executes Members of Workers’ Party for Watching South Korean Soap Operas,” *Telegraph* (London), October 29, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/11194489/North-Korea-executes-members-of-Workers-Party-for-watching-South-Korean-soap-operas.html>.

<sup>21</sup> See “N.Korea ‘Executed Jang Song-taek’s Family,’ ” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), January 27, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/01/27/2014012700914.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/01/27/2014012700914.html).

<sup>22</sup> Andrei Lankov, “Kim Jong Un’s Penchant for Purges,” Bloomberg View, May 15, 2015, <http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2015-05-15/north-korea-s-kim-jong-un-has-a-penchant-for-purges>.

<sup>23</sup> See Park and Pearson, “North Korea Executes Defense Chief with an Anti-Aircraft Gun: South Korea Agency.”

<sup>24</sup> See Choe, “Some Doubt That North Korea Executed a Top General.”

<sup>25</sup> Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., *North Korea and Regional Security in the Kim Jong-un Era: A New International Security Dilemma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 118.

<sup>26</sup> Jamie Crawford, “Is North Korea’s Kim Jong Un Hastening His Own Downfall?” CNN, May 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/15/politics/north-korea-kim-jong-un-executions/>.

<sup>27</sup> See Choi, “Hyon’s Execution Referenced in NK Lecture.”

<sup>28</sup> Choe, “Some Doubt That North Korea Executed a Top General” (comments of Kim Dong-yup of the University of North Korean Studies). See also “How Kim Jong-un Gets Rid of Threats to His Power,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), May 18, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/05/18/2015051801489.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/05/18/2015051801489.html).

<sup>29</sup> See Choe, “Some Doubt That North Korea Executed a Top General.” According to one account, about 20% to 30% of Party officials have been replaced while more than 40% of senior military officers have lost their posts. See “Over 40% of N.Korean Brass Replaced in Purges,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul),

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July 15, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/07/15/2015071500951.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/07/15/2015071500951.html).

<sup>30</sup> See Donald Kirk, "How Is Kim Jong-un Trying to Make His Mark?" *Christian Science Monitor*, June 30, 2015 (comments of Cheong Seong-chung of the Sejong Institute), <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2015/0630/How-is-Kim-Jong-un-trying-to-make-his-mark>.

<sup>31</sup> Choe, "Some Doubt That North Korea Executed a Top General." Consistent with Kim Dong-yup's words quoted in the text, it has been reported that General Hyon Yong Chol was executed because of his complaining about the growing power of the Party. See "Over 40% of N.Korean Brass Replaced in Purges."

<sup>32</sup> Many officials are fleeing. See, e.g., "A Dozen Senior N.Korean Officials Defect," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 2, 2015, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2015/07/02/2015070201795.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/07/02/2015070201795.html).

<sup>33</sup> "N. Korea's 'Reign of Terror' Stokes Security Jitters: Park," *Yonhap News Agency*, May 15, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2015/05/15/1/0301000000AEN20150515007700315F.html>. Kim Tae-woo of Dongkuk University expressed a similar thought when he talked about Kim's "politics of terrorism." See Kirk, "How Is Kim Jong-un Trying to Make His Mark?"

<sup>34</sup> Park and Pearson, "North Korea Executes Defense Chief with an Anti-Aircraft Gun: South Korea Agency." Michael Madden, a contributor to the 38 North think tank, noted this: "There is no clear or present danger to Kim Jong Un's leadership or regime stability, but if this continues to happen into next year, then we should seriously start to think about revising our scenarios on North Korea." *Ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> See Kang, "NK Shudders Under Reign of Terror."

<sup>36</sup> Choi Song Min, "Kim's Image Continues to Tumble," *Daily NK*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=13240&cataId=nk01500>.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce Bechtol, interview by John Batchelor and Gordon Chang, *The John Batchelor Show*, Cumulus Media Networks, March 27, 2013, <http://johnbatchelorshow.com/podcasts/2013/03/27/first-hour>.

<sup>38</sup> "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Won't Be Visiting Moscow, Russia Says," *NBC News*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-wont-be-visiting-moscow-russia-n351001>.

<sup>39</sup> See Kang, "NK Shudders Under Reign of Terror" (comments of Adam Cathcart of Leeds University).

<sup>40</sup> See David E. Sanger, "U.S. and China Agree to Hold Regular Talks on Hacking," *New York Times*, June 1, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/>

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world/asia/us-and-china-to-hold-talks-on-hacking.html.

<sup>41</sup> See Jeremy Page and Colleen McCain Nelson, "U.S.-China Summit Reveals Beijing's Drive," *Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324423904578521161140840702>.

<sup>42</sup> John Minnich, "The End of Consensus Politics in China," Stratfor, August 5, 2014, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/end-consensus-politics-china#axzz39Wc8MMAN>.

<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of the effect of Xi's attack on the Communist Party's patronage networks, see Lynette H. Ong, "Breaking Beijing?" Foreign Affairs Snapshot, June 9, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-09/breaking-beijing>.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Browne, "Elites Tremble as Xi Cleans House," *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/elites-tremble-as-xi-cleans-house-1407222978>.

<sup>45</sup> John Garnaut, "China's Power Politics," *New York Times*, August 11, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/12/opinion/chinas-power-politics.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/12/opinion/chinas-power-politics.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=1).

<sup>46</sup> Keith Zhai, "Xi's 'Shockingly Harsh' Politburo Speech Signals Tensions Over Anti-Graft Crackdown," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), August 5, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1567026/xis-shockingly-harsh-politburo-speech-signals-tensions-over-anti-graft>.

<sup>47</sup> See Teddy Ng, "Ling Jihua, Former Aide to China's Ex-President Hu Jintao, Placed Under Graft Probe," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), December 22, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1667990/senior-china-official-ling-jihua-placed-under-graft-probe>.

<sup>48</sup> See Steven Jiang, "Power for Sex? China Traps Former Top Aide Ling Jihua in Corruption Net," CNN, July 21, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/20/asia/china-corruption-case/>.

<sup>49</sup> See Jamil Anderlini, "China Atwitter Over Next 'Tiger' to Fall in Corruption Purge," *Financial Times*, February 26, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c5b00b6e-bd9e-11e4-9d09-00144feab7de.html#axzz3dch9fRCl>.

<sup>50</sup> "Comrade Xi's Purge," editorial, *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/comrade-xis-purge-1434063076>.



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<sup>51</sup> Dexter Roberts, “‘Tiger’ Zhou Yongkang to Be Tried for Corruption in China,” *Bloomberg Business*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-12-08/tiger-zhou-yongkang-to-be-tried-for-corruption-in-china>.

<sup>52</sup> See “Politburo: Party Adamant in Not Tolerating Factionalism,” *Xinhua News Agency*, December 30, 2014, <http://www.zz.chinanews.com/news/20141230/20621.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Some believe Xi Jinping, while he is attacking factions and factionalism, is building his own “Zhejiang faction.” See “Xi Relying on Old Boy Network to Strengthen Chinese Military,” *Asahi Shimbun* (Tokyo), March 27, 2015, <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201503270008>.

<sup>54</sup> These rumors seem to have been related to the transition of leadership from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. There were at least three sets of rumors of coups in the first three months of 2012. The most sensational of them—the third set—swept China in March of that year. See Jamil Anderlini, “Beijing on Edge Amid Coup Rumors,” *Financial Times*, March 21, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/650bb0f6-735f-11e1-aab3-00144feab49a.html#axzz3dch9fRC1>. The first group of rumors appears to be the most credible. See Gordon G. Chang, “Was There a Recent Coup Attempt in China?” *World Affairs Journal*, January 11, 2012, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/gordon-g-chang/was-there-recent-coup-attempt-china>. In early 2012, Hu Jintao, China’s leader at the time, issued stern public warnings to generals and admirals that they were subservient to the Communist Party. The warnings were interpreted as responses to perceived disloyalty in the military. See Minnie Chan, “Hu Reminds PLA of Their Allegiance to Party Rule,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), March 14, 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/article/995393/hu-reminds-pla-their-allegiance-party-rule>. Intriguingly, then Premier Wen Jiabao publicly warned that his country could descend into another Cultural Revolution. See “Wen Says China Needs Political Reform, Warns of Another Cultural Revolution If Without,” *Xinhua News Agency*, March 14, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/14/c\\_131466552.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-03/14/c_131466552.htm).

<sup>55</sup> In 2015, there were widely circulated stories about assassination attempts against Xi Jinping and his anti-corruption chief, Wang Qishan. See, e.g., Craig Hill, “Corrupt Officials Planning to Assassinate China’s President,” *China Daily Mail*, February 26, 2015, <http://chinadailymail.com/2015/02/26/corrupt-officials-planning-to-assassinate-chinas-president/>.

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., “Zhang Hong, ‘PLA Generals Take Rare Step of Swearing Loyalty to President Xi Jinping,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), April 3, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1463386/pla-generals-take-rare-step-swearing-loyalty-president-xi-jinping>.

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<sup>57</sup> For analysis of Xi Jinping's moves to tighten control of the military, see Willy Lam, "Xi Jinping Consolidates Power by Promoting Alumni of the Nanjing Military Region," *China Brief*, January 9, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=43376&cHash=e4bed6f2c2470d6f4349a3b4016603a6#.VYWsvSVJeNqA](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43376&cHash=e4bed6f2c2470d6f4349a3b4016603a6#.VYWsvSVJeNqA); Willy Lam, "Members of the Xi Jinping Clique Reviewed," *China Brief*, February 7, 2014, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=41933#.VYWsv0FJeNqA](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41933#.VYWsv0FJeNqA).

<sup>58</sup> See Willy Lam, interview by John Batchelor and Gordon Chang, *The John Batchelor Show*, Cumulus Media Network, June 24, 2015, <http://johnbatchelorshow.com/podcasts/wed-62415-hr-2-jbs-co-host-gordon-chang-forbescom-willy-lam-author-%E2%80%9Cchinese-politics-era-xi>.

<sup>59</sup> See Gordon G. Chang, "The Real Threat from China's Military: Going 'Rogue,'" *National Interest*, September 26, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-threat-chinas-military-going-rogue-11356>.

<sup>60</sup> See I-chung Lai, e-mail to author, March 15, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> See Abhinandan Mishra, "China-Pak Narco Nexus Behind Manipur Terror," *Sunday Guardian* (New Delhi), June 13, 2015, <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/news/china-pak-narco-nexus-behind-manipur-terror>.

<sup>62</sup> See Willy Lam, "White Paper Expounds Civil-Military Relations in Xi Era," *China Brief*, June 19, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=44059&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=25&cHash=c792c847d5c9fd9e2ac1f4559d8130eb#.VYWw0IJeNqC](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=44059&tx_ttnews[backPid]=25&cHash=c792c847d5c9fd9e2ac1f4559d8130eb#.VYWw0IJeNqC).

<sup>63</sup> See "Xi Relying on Old Boy Network to Strengthen Chinese Military."

<sup>64</sup> Willy Lam, "The Generals' Growing Clout in Diplomacy," *China Brief*, April 3, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=43750&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=25&cHash=409a44b02ddaeca4e1bba79909b1d817#.VYW1Z1JeNqC](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43750&tx_ttnews[backPid]=25&cHash=409a44b02ddaeca4e1bba79909b1d817#.VYW1Z1JeNqC).

<sup>65</sup> See Kenneth Lieberthal, interview by Judy Woodruff, "Examining U.S. Concerns on Trade, Security as China Welcomes New President," *PBS NewsHour*, March 14, 2013, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia-jan-june13-china\\_03-14/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia-jan-june13-china_03-14/). Lieberthal in that interview said this: "I think his real priority is domestic. What he needs is stability abroad in order to undertake reform domestically. But his big problem is that he—that the Communist Party has really nurtured very ardent nationalism domestically, and he can't allow himself to get on the wrong side of that or he won't have the political capital to carry out reforms. So he's trying to walk a tightrope. He has to be seen as strong in international affairs, but I don't think he's looking for trouble internationally. He'd rather avoid it if he can."

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<sup>66</sup> See “Traitor Jang Song Thaek Executed.”

<sup>67</sup> “N.Korea Miffed at Xi’s Visit to S.Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 2, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/07/02/2014070201623.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/07/02/2014070201623.html).

<sup>68</sup> “N.Korean Military Warned Not to Trust China,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), March 24, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/03/24/2014032401520.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/03/24/2014032401520.html).

<sup>69</sup> See “N.Korean Army Uses Pandas as Shooting Targets,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 4, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/07/04/2014070401576.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/07/04/2014070401576.html).

<sup>70</sup> See “N.Korea Moves Tanks, Armored Vehicles to Chinese Border,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), August 19, 2014, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/08/19/2014081900919.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/08/19/2014081900919.html).

<sup>71</sup> See Shuan Sim, “Kim Jong Un Executes Top General Over Disagreement, Sends Warning That Military Must Remain Loyal or Face Death,” *International Business Times*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/kim-jong-un-executes-top-general-over-disagreement-sends-warning-military-must-remain-1805330>.

<sup>72</sup> See Donald Kirk, “Mad, Bad North Korea May Just Be an Act,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), March 17, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1450116/mad-bad-north-korea-may-just-be-act>.

<sup>73</sup> See Lee Young-jong and Kang Jin-kyu, “Rodong Sinnun Buries Message from Xi Jinping,” *JoongAng Daily* (Seoul), September 11, 2014, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2994645>.

<sup>74</sup> See “China Not Invited to 3<sup>rd</sup> Death Anniversary of Kim Jong-il,” Yonhap News Agency, December 8, 2014, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2014/12/08/11/040100000AEN20141208004700315F.html>.

<sup>75</sup> See, e.g., Kim Young-jin, “Is China Feeling N. Korea Fatigue?” *Korea Times* (Seoul), April 19, 2012, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/06/116\\_109318.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/06/116_109318.html).

<sup>76</sup> Stapleton Roy, interview by author, New York City, February 25, 2004.

<sup>77</sup> The reasons for China’s lack of influence are varied. For a discussion of this matter, see Gordon G. Chang, “China and the Korean Peninsula,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Spring/Summer 2014, p. 116, <http://www.icks.org/publication/pdf/2014-SPRING-SUMMER/6.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Park Geun-hye, interview by Lally Weymouth, “‘Eventually We Will Face a Situation That Will Be Beyond Our Control,’” *Washington Post*, June 11, 2015,

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[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/an-interview-with-south-korean-president-park-geun-hye/2015/06/11/15abee3e-1039-11e5-9726-49d6fa26a8c6\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/an-interview-with-south-korean-president-park-geun-hye/2015/06/11/15abee3e-1039-11e5-9726-49d6fa26a8c6_story.html).

<sup>79</sup> Chinese policy is often described as the Three No's: no war, no instability, and no nukes. See, e.g., Shuxian Luo, "The Chinese Public Debates North Korea Policy," China Brief, July 2, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=44121&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=25&cHash=9a41c532f0003e439fc86a05bf813b3b#.VZX0vFKchqB](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=44121&tx_ttnews[backPid]=25&cHash=9a41c532f0003e439fc86a05bf813b3b#.VZX0vFKchqB). Andrei Lankov has three slightly different no's. See Andrei Lankov, "Nuclear North Korea: The Least Unacceptable Option," China-US Focus, March 6, 2013, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/nuclear-north-korea-the-least-unacceptable-option/>. In any event, Kim Jong Un has been able to defy China by engaging in activity Beijing has declared unacceptable.

<sup>80</sup> See Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping: Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 229.

<sup>81</sup> There is a vigorous debate inside the PLA about North Korea. See, e.g., Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Deciphering PLA Media Commentaries on North Korea: Going Rogue or Staying on Script," Korea Economic Institute of America Academic Paper Series, July 22, 2015, [http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei\\_aps\\_nathan\\_beauchamp-mustafaga\\_final.pdf](http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_aps_nathan_beauchamp-mustafaga_final.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> See Teddy Ng, "Xi Jinping Sends Pyongyang a Message by Making First Korea Trip as President to Seoul," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), July 2, 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1544521/xi-jinping-sends-pyongyang-message-making-first-korea-trip-president>.

<sup>83</sup> Mathieu Duchatel, "China's North Korea Policy: In the Footsteps of Russia?" China Brief, May 29, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=43962&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=25&cHash=ee41b41e3be9ec25eed7dda5c55ad42a#.VYXGwVJeNqC](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43962&tx_ttnews[backPid]=25&cHash=ee41b41e3be9ec25eed7dda5c55ad42a#.VYXGwVJeNqC).

<sup>84</sup> Jamie Metzler, "Doomsday: The Coming Collapse of North Korea," National Interest, June 14, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/doomsday-the-coming-collapse-north-korea-13107>.

<sup>85</sup> See John Pomfret, "As Talks Begin, China Views N. Korea as Risk," *Washington Post*, August 27, 2003, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/08/27/as-talks-begin-china-views-n-korea-as-risk/a09e18eb-f6fe-48d7-91a6-c84aed11b531/>.

<sup>86</sup> Metzler, "Doomsday: The Coming Collapse of North Korea."

<sup>87</sup> See Bob Collins, "Patterns of Collapse in North Korea," Combined Forces Command C5 Civil Affairs Newsletter, January 1996, p. 2.

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<sup>88</sup> For GDP estimates for recent years, see Bank of Korea, “Gross Domestic Product Estimates for North Korea in 2014,” July 17, 2015, <http://www.bok.or.kr/contents/total/eng/boardView.action?menuNaviId=634&boardBean.brdid=14033&boardBean.menuid=634&boardBean.rnum=2>.

<sup>89</sup> Joshua Stanton, “Expert: Cash Shortage Could Undermine Kim Jong Un’s Succession,” One Free Korea, April 17, 2015, <http://freekorea.us/2015/04/17/expert-cash-shortage-could-undermine-kim-jong-uns-succession/>.

<sup>90</sup> Chang Jae-soon, “N.K. Leader Has Yet to Consolidate Power, Could Be Marginalized into ‘Puppet’: U.S. Expert,” Yonhap News Agency, April 14, 2015, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2015/04/14/26/0401000000AEN20150414000200315F.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Anna Fifield and Michael Birnbaum “North Korea Might Be Courting Russia, But China Still Looms Larger,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/north-korea-might-be-courting-russia-but-its-still-no-match-for-china/2015/05/04/6ca7bd46-c90d-4c99-8fce-de58d93608a7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/north-korea-might-be-courting-russia-but-its-still-no-match-for-china/2015/05/04/6ca7bd46-c90d-4c99-8fce-de58d93608a7_story.html).

<sup>92</sup> See Justin McCurry, “North Korea and Russia Forge ‘Year of Friendship’ Pariah Alliance,” *Guardian* (London), March 12, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/12/russia-and-north-korea-forge-year-of-friendship-pariah-alliance>.

<sup>93</sup> Fifield and Birnbaum “North Korea Might Be Courting Russia, But China Still Looms Larger” (comments of Georgy Kunadze, former Russian deputy foreign minister).

<sup>94</sup> See Vladimir Soldatkin, “Russia Writes Off 90 Percent of North Korea Debt, Eyes Gas Pipeline,” Reuters, April 19, 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/04/19/russia-northkorea-debt-idUKL6NONB04L20140419>.

<sup>95</sup> See Fifield and Birnbaum “North Korea Might Be Courting Russia, But China Still Looms Larger.”

<sup>96</sup> Samuel Oakford, “No One Really Knows How Many Nukes North Korea Has,” Vice News, April 24, 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/no-one-really-knows-how-many-nukes-north-korea-has>.