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## ***North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook***

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# North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook

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The 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Delegates' Conference held on September 28<sup>th</sup> formally initiated the Kim Jong-un succession process. North Korea presented its dynastic successor to the world as Kim Jong-un appeared on the balcony alongside Kim Jong-il to observe a massive military parade on October 10<sup>th</sup>, celebrating the anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) founding. In an unusual move, the authorities even invited Western journalists to watch the festivities. One month later, Kim Jong-un was listed second on the official roster of the State Funeral Committee for the late Cho Myong-rok, *chasu* (vice-marshal) and first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC), who died on November 6<sup>th</sup>. It appeared that the ascension scenario had been fine-tuned beforehand and was progressing smoothly and according to plan.

As if in response, the defense ministers of South Korea and the US made reference to unstable conditions on the Korean peninsula, alluding to contingencies in North Korea, in the Joint Communiqué issued following the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) of October 8<sup>th</sup>. They also agreed to develop a new operation plan in preparation for a potential contingency situation. It is premised upon the belief that North Korea's 3<sup>rd</sup>

generation succession might increase the risk of crisis for the North Korea regime.

North Korea maintains its ruling system through tight authoritarian control over its people, in which power is centralized and concentrated on the personage of the regime's 'one and only leader' (*yuil suryong*). The supreme leader is bound to solely and personally wield total authority. It is certain therefore, that the succession process signifying a replacement of leadership can determine the stability of the entire state. Additionally, in the face of external conundrums like the U.S.-China rivalry or international pressure on denuclearization, North Korea's stabilization policy for succession may have consequences for security not only on the Korean Peninsula but for Northeast Asia as a whole. The North Korean problem is no longer simply a diplomatic issue. As the international community became more aware of the seriousness of North Korean issues, international credit rating agencies began considering the North Korea factor in 2010, when appraising the South Korean economy. Thus, the time has come for a diagnosis of the stability of the succession system. A period of systemic instability could be a truly critical phase in North Korea's history, as it can result in a complete crisis within North Korean regime.

This paper first analyses the shockwaves that the succession process may produce in North Korea's internal political dynamics. It then attempts to forecast and assess possible North Korean strategies for succession and how they would influence regime sustainability.

## **I. Characteristics of the Succession System**

There are a number of important features in North Korea's current succession system, as revealed at the recent Party Delegates' Conference. First, a power transition has been set into motion to ensure the "3rd generation hereditary succession" of Kim Jong-un. The regime has gone public with its plans for the succession, based on blood ties, of another supreme leader to

follow in the footsteps of Kim Jong-il. This is the moment when the tradition of family privatization of the state is being firmly entrenched. Through Kim Jong-un's promotion to the rank of 4-star general of the North Korean Peoples' Army (KPA), he has gained a foothold to take control over the military, while his sudden meteoric rise to the position of Vice Chair of the KWP Central Military Committee (CMC) reveals an intention to exercise control over the military via the Party.

Second, Kim Jong-il's kinship members and a vassal-like entourage have been summoned to be guardians in charge of supervising and supporting the succession process. Members of the guardian cadre have been appointed to key positions in KWP organizations such as the CMC, Politburo, KWP Central Committee (CC), and Central Party Secretariat. At the core of this emerging guardianship government, are Kim Jong-il's sister, Kim Kyong-hui (4-star general, Politburo member, director of the KWP Light Industry Department) and her husband Jang Song-taek (Politburo candidate member, CMC member, NDC vice chairman, director of the KWP Administration Department).

Other powerful confidants are included as well; Choe Ryong-hae,<sup>1</sup> close friend of Jang (Central Party Secretary, CMC member, former general secretary of the North Hwanghae Province Party Committee); Kim Pyong-hae, the closest aid of Kim Jong-il (Politburo candidate member, Central Party secretary); Moon Kyong-duk (Central Party Secretary, Politburo candidate member, general secretary of the Pyongyang City Party Committee), who supposedly worked with Jang, when Jang was the director (1989-1995) of the KWP Youth and Three-Great-Revolution-Small-Team (TRT) Movement and Moon was a vice chairman of Central Committee in the League of Socialist Working Youth (LSWY); and Kim Kyong-ok (4-star general, CMC member, first vice director of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department). The North Korean state's true patrimonial nature is on display through the composition of this succession structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Choe Ryong-hae is a son of former North Korean Premier Choe Hyon, one of Kim Il-sung's anti-Japanese guerrilla comrades.

On the other hand, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Jang Song-taek is also being kept in check by Kim Jong-il. The two men have paradoxical relations in that Jang can be the most powerful and trustworthy guardian for the young Kim, but at the same time, can be the greatest threat competing for the regime when Kim Jong-il dies. This is why Kim Jong-il decided to promote Kim Kyong-hui to a few senior positions with his full support. Kim Jong-il wants her to balance Jang Song-taek, while Jang, aware of his dear leader's suspicions, has to be extremely cautious in deciding his political path.

The fact that Jang Song-taek remained a candidate member of the Politburo might be taken as a sign that his rise in stature has tapered off somewhat. But as explained above, it would be more reasonable to interpret this as a dual-purpose strategy to avert the danger of power becoming too concentrated in one individual as well as to prevent any antagonistic groups from concentrating its force against Jang's escalated rise in power. Kim Jong-il and Jang seemed to *tacitly* agree on the middle-ground terms, which may temporarily satisfy them both.

In terms of political experience and latent influence, as well as personal reliability – which is the most important quality in a supporter – Kim Jong-il can be hard-pressed to find a guardian group that can surpass the power couple of Jang Song-taek and Kim Kyong-hui, with their direct blood ties to the father-son leadership. It is widely believed that the couple is already making policy-decisions behind the curtain when Kim Jong-il's health is failing, and it is highly likely that they will become principal managers of any crisis arising following Kim Jong-il's retirement or death.

In this regard, we need to note the rise of Jang's close aids, including Choe Ryong-hae, Ri Young-ho (Jang's classmate at the *Mankyungdae* Red-Flag Academy, KPA General Chief of Staff, Politburo Standing Committee member, CMC vice chair, KPA *chasu*), Woo Dong-cheuk (first vice chairman of the State Security Department), Ji Jae-ryong (director of the KWP International Department, ambassador to China), Park Jong-soon (first deputy director of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department), and Rhee Young-su (allegedly

director of the KWP Labor Department,<sup>2</sup> former chairman of the LSWY Central Committee).

Third, there has been a partial generational shift in the military. The rise of members of the so-called “new military leadership” has been accompanied by the relative decline of the elderly military group dominated by Oh Kuk-ryol, Kim Il-chol, Kim Young-choon, and Jo Myung-rok, who passed away on November 6<sup>th</sup>. The emerging younger generals include Ri Young-ho (chief of KPA General Staff, Politburo Standing Committee member, Vice Field-Marshal), Kim Jong-gak (First Vice Director of the General Political Bureau, 4-star general), Choe Boo-il (recently promoted 4-star general, vice chief of the KPA General Staff), Kim Myong-guk (chief of the General Staff Operations Bureau, CMC member), Jung Myong-do (Navy General Commander, 4-star admiral), Kim Kyok-sik<sup>3</sup> (4-star general, 4th Army commander, former KPA General Chief of Staff), Hyon Young-chul (8th Army commander), Kim Young-chul (director of the General Reconnaissance Bureau in the NDC), and the newly promoted Ryu Kyung, Ro Heung-se, and Ri Du-jung.

It is believed that this shift originated mainly from a desire to give the successor and his close family, such as Jang Song-taek, a firmer grip on the military. This move has a strongly preventative characteristic, using a generational transition to preempt possible resistance by members of the old military guard or related military elements in response to the organizational shift to the Kim Jong-un succession system. The rise of individuals like Choe

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<sup>2</sup> It is an important party position in charge of supervising and managing the administering mass organizations (AMOs), including the North Korean LSWY, Democratic Women’s Federation, Federation of Agricultural Workers, and the Federation of Trade Unions. He can potentially mobilize more than 8 million people to implement and safeguard the succession’s processes.

<sup>3</sup> In early 2009, he was *formally* demoted from the highest position of the KPA General Chief of Staff to a field position as the 4th Army Commander in charge of defending the Southern Hwanghae Province and the maritime borderline (Northern Limit Line of South Korea, NLL). Since his commission, North Korean military provocations have markedly increased in his region. They culminated in the *Cheonan* Incident and the recent *Yonpyong Island* artillery attack. He was likely assigned there to carry out special missions directly issued from North Korea’s top leaders. Despite Kim Kyok-sik’s *formal* demotion, it is highly likely that Kim Jong-il *informally* empowered him, which is possible only with Kim Jong-il’s personal and deep confidence in him. It needs to be remembered that North Korea is a patrimonial state *per se*.

Boo-il, who, thanks to quick adaptation and reorganization, have rapidly acquired vassal-like status, hints at the possibility of a shortcut to the ranks of the higher elite. The newly emerged military leaders are guardians intended to protect not only the succession process but also the throne of Kim Jong-un into the near future. It also is very suggestive that Kim Myong-kook, Jung Myong-do, Kim Kyok-sik, and Kim Young-chul, who are all allegedly associated with the *Cheonan* Incident, have been promoted in the recent wave of generation shifts.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, the Military-First ruling coalition succeeded in maintaining its monopolistic supremacy. Its main participants secured central leadership positions through the guardians' government to perpetuate their iron-fist domination over the North Korean military-industrial complex and security organizations. Many of them have been suspected of being the main agents in charge of planning and managing the nuclear weapons program and WMD proliferation through illicit trade.

Individuals connected to the military-industrial ruling coalition, such as Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, aforementioned Ri Young-ho (chief of the General Staff, major proponent of military-first strategies mainly focused on the development of asymmetric military forces), Woo Dong-cheuk (Politburo candidate member, CMC member, first vice chair of the NDC), Kim Chang-sop (head of the State Security Political Department), Ju Sang-sung (Politburo member, NDC member, director of the People's Security Department), Ju Kyu-chang (1<sup>st</sup> vice director of the KWP Department of Defense Industry), and Chae Hui-jung (CC member, director of the KWP Document Management Office, former chair of the National Science and Technology Committee), Jun Byong-ho (Politburo member, Central Party secretary in charge of military logistics, allegedly head supervisor of nuclear weapons development<sup>5</sup>), Joo Sang-sung (Political Bureau member, NDC member, director of People's Security

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<sup>4</sup> Hyun Gun, "The Five Culprits of the *Cheonan* Incident," *Open Radio for North Korea*, May 27, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Solomon, "North Korean Pair Viewed as Key to Secret Arms Trade," *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2010.

Department), Joo Gyu-chang (director of the Party Defense Industry Department), and Baek Sae-bong (chair of the Second Economic Committee, NDC member), are now entrenched to be the regime's foremost praetorian guards. This signals a continuation of the military-first policy even in the successive government.

#### Guardians

<b>Kim Family Relatives and Vassals</b>	<b>Kim Kyong-Hui</b> (4-star general, Politburo member, director of the KWP Light Industry Bureau), <b>Jang Song-Taek</b> (Kim Kyung Hee's husband, Politburo candidate member, CMC member, NDC vice chair), <b>Choi Ryong-Hae</b> (close friend of Jang, Central Party Secretary, CMC member), <b>Kim Pyong-Hae</b> (close friend of Kim senior, Politburo candidate member, Central Party Secretary), <b>Mun Kyong-Duk</b> (Central Party Secretary, former LSWY vice chair), <b>Kim Kyong-Ok</b> (1 <sup>st</sup> vice director of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department, 4-star general), etc
<b>The New Military</b>	<b>Ri Young-Ho</b> (Jang's classmate at the Mankyungdae Academy, KPA General Chief of Staff, Politburo Standing Committee member, CMC vice chair, KPA <i>chasu</i> ), <b>Kim Jong-Gak</b> (1 <sup>st</sup> vice director of the KPA General), <b>Kim Kyok-Sik</b> (4-star general, 4th Army commander, former KPA General Chief of Staff), <b>Kim Young Chul</b> (director of the KWP Reconnaissance Bureau), etc
<b>Military-First Praetorians</b>	<b>Kim Jong-Il</b> (NDC chairman), <b>Ri Young-Ho</b> (chief of the General Staff), <b>Woo Dong-Cheuk</b> (Politburo candidate member, CMC member, NDC 1 <sup>st</sup> vice chair), <b>Joo Sang-Sung</b> (Politburo member, NDC member, director of People's Security), <b>Joo Kyu-Chang</b> (1 <sup>st</sup> vice director of the KWP Department of Defense Industry), <b>Jun Byong-ho</b> (Politburo member, Central Party Secretary in charge of military logistics, head supervisor of nuclear weapons development), <b>Kim Chang-Sop</b> (head of the State Security Political Department), etc

## II. Political Implications

Regarding the political implications of North Korean succession, it should be noted that the previous revolutionary and charismatic authority structure under Kim Jong-il has been transformed to a patrimonial and personal one. The completion of such a transition has laid the foundation for the current succession to Kim Jong-un, which has been formalized by the official announcement of succession.

If violence and socio-economic benefits are the physical foundation for commanding the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, then the issue



of garnering voluntary and spontaneous obedience to the existing system of distributed power and status – i.e. constructing a leadership system of convincing legitimacy – can be considered the superstructure that determines the costs of maintaining the system and the effectiveness of rule. If the basis for legitimacy is decisively weakened, then regime-maintenance costs will soar and it will become increasingly difficult to efficiently manage the system.

After the departure of the first generation of charismatic leadership through a phase of revolutionary transition, the task of stabilizing the political system around a more secure everyday-routine ruling structure is extremely difficult. Inevitably, the issue of selecting the second generation leader becomes a crucial factor in determining system stability. In a system of authoritarian one-man rule, the problem of passing on supreme power is even more delicate. Under a personal leadership system issues of regime legitimacy, focused on the method of power transition, inevitably become a topic of public debate, potentially entailing much feared consequences for authoritarians.

The *suryong* system, in which the one and only ruler Kim Il Sung held total power, North Korea's solution to the issue of power transfer was an atavistic father-son succession, which based ruling legitimacy on 'hereditary charisma.'<sup>6</sup> This was a reactionary choice that repudiated the modern alternative of institutionalizing the selection of a successor through the revitalization of a formal communist party-state system.

They made doubly sure of the stability of the father-son succession by creating a joint leadership structure under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. This joint father-son governance system, which supported the power handover for over 20 years, faithfully performed the role of minimizing frictions and opposition in the process of transforming North Korea's revolutionary dictatorship into an Asiatic autocracy of resurrected Oriental despotism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 234.

<sup>7</sup> 'Oriental despotism' is a term for an autocratic leadership system characterized by excessive state intervention and subordination of society, a bloated management bureaucracy, autocratic rule, marginalization of the people through exploitation and forced mobilization, a hereditary leadership class, and theocratic political ideals. Karl A.

Under the joint government, the basis for legitimacy was a charismatic-ideological supra-structure based on a quasi-religious belief in the sacred mission of carrying out the leader's revolutionary tasks. On the other hand, the dualistic joint governance also incorporated the traditionalist patrimonial-personalist ruling system, as represented by the aforementioned father-son succession. The latter elements would become the substructure of the current political system.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the severe shrinkage of the North Korean economy have put the regime in danger of collapse. However, the Kim Jong-il government was able to use strong 'muddling-through' survival tactics to preserve the core elite group loyal to the Kim family, even while demanding mass-sacrifices from the entire population, thanks to the supporting foundation of charismatic authority it had inherited. The aura of the charismatic legacy left by Kim Il-sung essentially rescued his son in that time of crisis.

With the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation succession to Kim Jong-un, the regime has lost the ability to convincingly claim charismatic legitimacy in the eyes of both the elites and the ruled. The foundation of legitimacy is obviously transferred to traditional patrimonialism. In particular, the unprivileged masses, having experienced the tragedy of a failed state system at its darkest hour, have no choice but to acknowledge that the current regime has failed to qualify as a charismatic-revolutionary leadership. They must find it absurd that the government is now boasting of the young successor's charisma based on his blood line. If Kim Jong-il departs soon, without bestowing sacred authority, the North Korean state will degenerate into a decadent regime forced to resort to ad-hoc nationalistic mass agitation and excessively violent repression to deal with subversive acts originating from either the top or the bottom of society.<sup>8</sup>

The patrimonial leadership structure uses a system of distributing political power and economic benefits in exchange for the loyalty and

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Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New York: Vintage, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> As it approaches its final phase, the Kim Jong-il regime is already showing a clear tendency toward this kind of decline.

obedience of the management strata and the subjugated classes. Because of this, the general transition from a combined leadership system tinged with charismatic authority to an overtly familial-personalist leadership system will inevitably cause the expense of regime maintenance to increase rapidly. This is due to the fact that they will not be able to rely on voluntary obedience and sacrifice based on ideological devotion and faith. As they have repudiated the notion of seeking a fundamental solution to the task of increasing domestic production through comprehensive reforms of the political and economic system, in the immediate future it will be effectively impossible for the regime to afford the enormous costs of supporting the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation succession, and as a result they will fall into an existential dilemma.

Second, they have attempted to raise the functionality and status of the Party in symbolic terms. This reveals the intent to normalize the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation succession structure through the Party organization (“The Workers’ Party is the Party of Kim Il-sung”) and to keep the bloated military leadership and elderly high-level officials in check. The Party may work to prevent divisions from forming among the power elites by increasing consensus through systematic distribution of power, and promoting a new group of elites to co-opt a portion of the potential opposition.<sup>9</sup>

This partial and symbolic rehabilitation of the functions of the Party can be seen as a tool to prepare for stabilization during the post-Kim Jong-il transition period. Further, it appears to be an attempt to restore the official façade of legitimacy of the unofficial, familial leadership structure by making a symbolic gesture of returning to a formal-legal impersonalized form of governance based on the bureaucratic institutions of the Party.

However, because they are trying to maintain the basic framework of ultimate power succession and patrimonial rule, any political reforms will be

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<sup>9</sup> For detailed information on the correlation between the durability of authoritarian systems and the systematization of the general functions of the ruling party, refer to: Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 16-43.

limited. In this respect, predictions of complete restoration of the Party-State system or a return to a normal socialist state system are of dubious credibility. The partial rise in the Party's status is not so much a restoration of the Party-State system as it is a stopgap measure to compensate for the limits of one-man rule and support the implementation of the succession structure.

Further, as it was impossible from the outset to expect Kim Jong-un to hold the same degree of status and power as his father, this can also be seen as a move to temporarily revive the role of "the Party as the advance guard" of the supreme leader in order to relieve some of the burdens on Kim Jong-un. However, it can also be interpreted as a move by the core group of supporters, led by Jang Song-taek, Ri Young-ho, and Kim Kyong-hui to spread their influence through Party organizations.

Third, the declaration of Kim Jong-un's succession can be seen as an official declaration of the permanency of the *ancien regime*. From the Kim Jong-il regime's perspective, in terms of transferring power, there is only one practical option that allows them to: 1) minimize fissures among the current ruling elite; 2) maintain their ruling privileges; and 3) decrease the level of political and social shock and instability that may result from the power transmission. That option is another father-son succession.

Ultimately these developments can be seen as a declaration by the regime to the world and ordinary North Korean people that it will continue to fight to the death for its own survival, through the grossly enlarged military-industrial complex which has become a permanent ruling structure. This *songun* (military-first) system backs the ruling structure through acts of violence, the dominant paradigm of the police state buttressed by public security mechanisms, and a adventurous foreign policy which employs nuclear gambits and military blackmail against neighboring countries for the sake of prolonging the regime.

### **III. Risk Factors**

Can the North Korean succession system proceed smoothly as planned? There are numerous elements which could potentially derail the process.

First, there is the possibility of power struggles breaking out over the redistribution of power and privileges. As the distribution of privileges is crucial to maintaining fidelity in a family-based system of personal rule, the regime will have to disburse various special favors and rights to the new elites and ruling organizations. However, with limited resources available for distribution, this process is likely to provoke fierce conflict among rival organizations and factions.

Particularly if they attempt to partially introduce systemic control functions through the restoration of the Party-State system, they will have to conduct both individual purges and redistributions of limited national resources (e.g. redistributing resources from the military economy to the Party or People's economies), but doing so is likely to lead to rifts between the Party and the military. It will be effectively impossible for a conglomerate-style central leadership to keep control over the younger group of active military officers who command the field armies, and this may even lead to conflicts between generations or between ranks.

By similar logic, revived conflicts may erupt among the Party, military, and government, as well as intra-organizational rivalries. Particularly in a familial/personalist leadership structure based on informal patron-client relationships, these sorts of conflicts can lead to factionalization within groups sharing common interests. This would lead to dramatic changes in power dynamics and opportunistic conflicts between factions brought on by the realignment of power and interests, which are likely to contribute to an overall disruption of regime stability.

Second, it will be unreasonable to expect the Kim Jong-un guardianship government to achieve the level of stability seen under the Kim Il-sung-Kim Jong-il joint government. Kim Jong-il began the process of succession in 1974 when he was elected a member of the Politburo and the head of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department, and continued in 1980 when he

formally took the role of successor with his appointment to the Politburo Standing Committee and the CMC. Considering that, we may postulate that it takes at least 5 years to properly establish someone in the role of successor in the North Korean context of political and organizational culture. If Kim Jong-il dies in the near future (within 5 years) the aforementioned power struggle will likely be much more cutthroat and chaotic.

If Kim Jong-il dies before Kim Jong-un is fully positioned as the sole and strong dictator, the scramble for rights and privileges may expand downward from the top into a limitless competition in the absence of control or oversight from the center. Of course, with the core support group of close relatives in place and mutually keeping each other in check, that possibility is low, but with the position of absolute power in play we cannot exclude the possibility of a power struggle even at the highest level. In the worst-case scenario, it is even possible that a series of coups and counter-coups may break out in turn, which can reduce the country to a leaderless anarchy. But such potential instability does not necessarily generate reformers from the top or revolutionaries from the bottom.<sup>10</sup> Decreasing regime stability and increasing confusion will simply raise the possibilities.

On the other hand, if Kim Jong-il continues to govern for a sufficient period of time, then the next-generation leadership group may have a chance to form its own factional alignment with the successor at its center, i.e. if an unacknowledged duplicate power structure forms, there is still the possibility of smoldering enmity remaining between the older and younger leadership groups. The attempt to link Kim Jong-un to the next generation offspring of the revolutionist noble-families represented by Choe Ryong-hae and Oh Il-jong (newly promoted to the director of the KWP Military Department, CC member, son of Oh Jin-woo, former KPA general chief of staff) seems to have a safeguard purpose to remove a potential apple of discord between the old and the new powers in the future.

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<sup>10</sup> A typical patrimonial state of the Chosun dynasty lasted for centuries despite the frequent repetition of sectarian strife and chaos.

Finally, there is the possibility of resistance from the people. As the state continues to fail, the public loyalty to the system is certain to grow weaker. Through its *songun* and public security politics, the Kim Jong-il government has selectively invested its scarce resources and what depleted funds remain after the financial collapse into the organizations operating the state's violent means of control and the privileged groups which have taken them over. This has the character of a preemptive strike to protect against national chaos and systemic damage which may be brought on by latent resistance from the unarmed and oppressed masses.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of the masses, which have been forced to fight for their very survival due to the selectively enforced redistribution of resources, it must seem that the North Korean system is a kleptocracy with a predatory economy.

As a result of over a half-century of totalitarian rule, spontaneous civil organizations, student groups, free labor unions, and religious groups that could function as focal points for mobilizing resistance have become effectively extinct; thus the likelihood of mass resistance forming in an autonomous and organized way is extremely low. However, the collapse of the public distribution system and the emergence of a self-sufficient means of survival through spontaneously emerging grassroots markets have accelerated the tendency toward social secularization and economic rationalization, further diminishing the likelihood of automatic obedience to the idealized totalitarian mobilization system. Clearly, passive resistance and quiet acts of disobedience are on the rise. Therefore the cost effectiveness of government control will inevitably suffer an overall decline.

The collapse of the public distribution system has led to the mass emergence of marketization forces which may have little political impact but are of great social significance. In toiling ceaselessly for their own survival and laying the foundation for a new economic movement from the bottom up, these pro-market forces are acting as pioneers to inspire the masses with outside information and furthering the aforementioned new behaviors and

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<sup>11</sup> As a result, the oppressed people ended up preferring refuge to resistance.

ways of thinking.<sup>12</sup> The Kim regime, in response, has pursued repeated anti-market measures, with the primary objective was to block further expansion of the pro-market forces composed of emergent market retailers, peddlers, criminalized traders, and burgeoning commercial capital. For example, such anti-market policies include the step by step abolition of the 7.1 reform measures, that was executed as soon as those reform measures were adopted in 2002, as well as the currency redenomination of 2009.<sup>13</sup> The relations of the pro-market group and the anti-revolutionary leadership in power are, in principle, antagonistic and contradictory. If the elite class begins to fracture, these pro-market forces might mobilize into a latent resistance movement.

Under current conditions the direct coordination and political mobilization of the subjugated classes seems a remote fantasy, but with the addition of fractures among the elite class, this latent explosive force may become a reality. If destabilizing factors increase while the government's hold on power grows weaker and disorganized, with broad-based mass resistance begins breaking out continuously, then various administered mass organizations (AMOs), like the LSWY that were created and managed by the state to perform totalitarian mobilization and surveillance functions, might be converted into the organizational-ideological focal point for mobilizing an opposition force. This may even form under the leadership of resistance elites, which might be composed of former power elites excluded from the top state-leadership group due to fatal defeats in the post-Kim Jong-il power struggles.

Or the exact opposite may happen: after Kim Jong-il's death, if fractures among the elite and mass disobedience become threats, the top

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<sup>12</sup> Based on the survey results of North Korean refugees, Haggard and Noland argue that there appears to be institutionally and behaviorally market-oriented changes in the administration as well as in the general public, and such changes have mainly been driven by people's reactions to the failed state, not by the government's policy. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Reform from Below: Behavioral and Institutional Change in North Korea," *PIIE Working Paper* 09-8 (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, September, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, *The North Korean Economy: Between Crisis and Catastrophe* (New Brunswick: Transactions, 2007).



leadership may attempt to break through the crisis by instigating a *juche* fundamentalist mass struggle in the style of a “cultural revolution” in order to take back ruling authority. Amidst the ideological tempest the central leadership may attempt to extend their grip on power through mass mobilization of radical young shock-troops<sup>14</sup> to mass-execute large-scale purges of intellectuals and bureaucrats who display any passively disobedient tendencies and politically meaningful doubts. If such a scenario occurs in reality, internal instability may heighten dramatically.

#### IV. Strategies for a Sustainable Succession

The group that is most knowledgeable and at the same time most concerned about the risk factors including those mentioned above would be North Korea's guardian government. What then, would be their strategies for a successful succession? To predict the policy of such an unstable country as North Korea is practically impossible. But entering 2010, North Korea showed a series of external and internal activities seemingly in support of the succession, and these activities provided many suggestions on the future policies aiming to sustain the succession process. It is highly probable that North Korea would repeat the same pattern of activity, but in a further reinforced form. Focusing on this pattern, various strategic options that the guardians may choose for purpose of successfully completing the succession will be examined in the following.

First, power reinforcement of the guardian cadre will begin in earnest. Kim's close relatives, vassals, and new military groups have emerged as vanguards of the guardian cadre, and as shown in the 9.28 Party Delegates'

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<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is noteworthy that the three key figures, Moon Kyong-duk, Choe Ryong-hae, and Lee Myong-soo, are positioned in the core of the guardians' government. All of them have administrative expertise in managing the nation-wide party and state youth organizations. They are close clients of Jang Song-taek.

Conference, there will be a substantial reshuffling among the power elites.<sup>15</sup>

There is a low possibility that a radical shift in generations through massive purges will be executed, because it might shake up the newly risen guardianship government. However, there might be a set of gradual and covert preparatory operations targeting potential threats to Kim Jong-un and his succession, namely the elders in the party and the military. Some signs have already been spotted; Rhee Jae-kang, who was a first vice chairman of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department and a key supporter for the 2nd youngest son, Kim Jong-chul, died in a car accident in June 2010; the military elders who were loyal to the regime were disqualified during the shift in generations; and Cho Myong-rok (first vice chairman of the NDC, Politburo Standing Committee member, vice marshal of the Republic) timely died of chronic disease.

Though the gradual purge is carefully implemented like an installment plan, the possibility of unexpected revolt cannot entirely be excluded. However, organized and pre-planned resistance is unlikely to happen during Kim Jong-il's reign. Rather, the core issue of the succession is an invisible, yet growing tension against the new vassal group of Kim Jong-un that includes Choe Ryong-hae, Ri Young-ho, and Choe boo-il and the Jang Song-taek line. But while Kim Jong-il effectively maintains his ruling authority, issues like power struggles and the emergence of new factions are unlikely to surface.

Secondly, the adventurist military-first policy can be used as a means to legitimize Kim Jong-un's succession. In the year 2012, when North Korea is supposed to open the gates of a *Kangsung Taeguk* (Strong and Prosperous Nation), it is very likely that substantial leadership authority will be conferred upon Kim Jong-un. A Party Congress is also anticipated in order to perform Kim's coronation. Kim Jong-un has only one year left to prove his leadership quality through great achievements. The year 2012 will definitely mark a

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<sup>15</sup> When studying 'intentional' changes in policy, system, and organization, it is important to keep in mind that the primary principle of the North Korean regime is regime survival and family succession.

watershed of the earlier settlement of the succession,<sup>16</sup> and it is clear that North Korea will devote all its available resources to solidify a base for the succession in 2011.

To embellish the new leadership in such a short period of time, there seems to be no feasible option but to become a nuclear state or to show off its strong military power. The guardianship government may proceed further into military adventurism. In this case the re-entrenched military-first coalition will willingly pursue policies such as military provocations and nuclear weapons development to consolidate supremacy. This bodes ill for the prospects of successful negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue.

In addition, it will have negative impacts on South Korea's politics and economy. The sinking of the *Cheonan* naval ship last March and the artillery attack on *Yonpyong* Island the following November were solid demonstrations of North Korea's hard-line policy. They may have been planned to consolidate the power elites of the military-first ruling coalition and to lay a foundation for Kim's succession by empowering relatively young hardliners of Kim Jong-un's guardian cadres.

Kim Jong-il's military-first policy promoted not only a reinforcement of the military, its defense industries, and secret service agencies, but also the militarization of the Party. In order to maintain unity and solidarity of the military-first policy praetorians, who become the core ruling elite in the regime, North Korea cannot help but continue its nuclear development program and periodically repeat military provocations. Support from these military and secret service agencies that monopolize the means of violence and coercion is essential for regime survival, especially if the country becomes a failed state and the public becomes alienated from the regime.

Thus, it is highly likely that the young Kim will take a more aggressive and adventurous stance whenever he feels insecure about his supporting

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<sup>16</sup> The year 2012 is important because North Korea has placed much significance upon it. North Korea will do whatever it takes to prove to its people that it has achieved the goal of becoming a strong and prosperous country.

system, which highly dependent upon the power of armed praetorians. Also, the military-first leadership might consider military provocations as warnings to the U.S. and South Korea, believing that it would prevent the two countries from taking advantage of its unstable transition to weaken the North Korean regime.

Third, in desperate need of foreign assistance to keep popular discontent in check, the guardians' government might occasionally make tactical gestures of reconciliation or appeasement. It may also seek reinforced economic cooperation from China without adopting any comprehensive reform policies that might lead to the collapse of the regime.

A report estimates that even after 2008, when the economic situation seemed to improve, many North Koreans continued to struggle with starvation, depending solely upon external aid.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the harvest in 2010 appears severely damaged by typhoons and floods. International sanctions<sup>18</sup> have accelerated the economic recession, and pessimism grows not only among the public but also in the elites, due to the forced execution of hereditary succession into the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation. However, although national opening and reform would be a fundamental solution, it is too risky for the regime because it may directly lead to the collapse of the regime. A close examination of the composition of the guardianship government and the revised party regulations reconfirms that no fundamental reform can be expected in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>17</sup> Dick K. Nanto and Emma Chanlett-Avery, "The North Korean Economy: Leverage and Policy Analysis," *CRS Report RL 32493* (Congressional Research Service, Updated Aug. 26 2008).

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the existing UN Resolutions 1695, 1718, 1874 and an administrative order 13382 on suspension on WMD trade, the U.S. has tried imposing additional financial sanctions on North Korea after the *Cheonan* Incident. Refer to the following for more U.S. sanctions. Karin Lee and Julia Choi, "North Korea: Unilateral and Multilateral Economic Sanctions and U.S. Department of Treasury Actions 1955-April 2009," *National Committee on North Korea Working Paper* (Last Updated April 28, 2009).

Therefore, to sustain the regime without a reform, North Korea needs material assistance from outside. Resumption of the Six-Party talks, attempts to ease tensions in inter-Korean relations, and a direct dialogue with the U.S. are exemplary appeasement measures that North Korea has sought on a temporary basis. North Korea never forgets the past experiences in which it made the U.S. and South Korea give in to its demands by going through nuclear negotiations.<sup>19</sup> If such appeasement measures succeed and any talks take place, it provides Kim Jong-un an additional opportunity to make a debut in the international diplomatic arena.

As North Korea becomes more and more isolated from the international community following the *Cheonan* Incident, Kim Jong-il has tried to break away from the isolation by ameliorating relations with China. Having made two visits to China this year, Kim Jong-il seems to be seeking China's support to ensure a smooth hereditary succession to Kim Jong-un. As shown in the Northeast Asia Economic Cooperation Forum held on September 2, 2010 at *Changchun*, China, North Korea strives to earn economic aid from China by expanding their economic cooperation in projects such as joint regional development projects in Jilin and Ragin-Sonbong special economic zone. The appointment of Ji Jae-ryong, Jang Song-taek's confidant, as ambassador to China on October 25, 2010 and the northeastern *Dongbei* region tour in November, led by North Korea delegation led by Prime Minister, Choe Yong-rim can also be seen in the same context.

Nevertheless, these appeasement gestures should be regarded as auxiliary instruments attached to an overall hard-line foreign policy. North Korea seems intent upon exploiting the geopolitical paradox in which it can obtain foreign assistance as long as it can convincingly show the capacity to produce tensions among major regional actors. North Korea is well aware of

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<sup>19</sup> North Korea received more than one billion US dollars from the U.S. during the same period, in addition to Sunshine-policy assistance from the South Korean government. Mark E. Manyin and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Assistance to North Korea," *CRS Report* R40095 (Congressional Research Service, December 24, 2008).

the contradictory situation, in that security-threatening provocation is the only effective bait to fish up assistance from its neighboring countries. As discussed above in the China-North Korea economic cooperation cases, North Korea received economic and political promises from China amidst the growing rivalry between the U.S. and China following the *Cheonan* Incident.

To North Korea, appeasement measures are merely follow-ups of military provocations, harvesting measures to reap rewards for bad and threatening actions.<sup>20</sup> In this light, there is every indication that North Korea would readily resort to military provocations if it fails to get what it wants through appeasement gestures. After all, North Korea seems to believe that it should demonstrate time to time that it possesses power strong enough to disrupt regional status quo.

## V. Advent of an Era of Uncertainty

So far, this paper has analyzed the political and strategic framework of North Korea's hereditary succession, with the important year of 2012 nearly one year away. What then, would be the probable result of the current succession policy?

There are weaknesses in the current succession structure, such as Kim Jong-un's political inexperience and lack of legitimacy, but the key variable that will quickly determine the stability of the post-Kim Jong-il regime is Kim Jong-il's ability to sustainably check and control political competition. Assuming that Kim Jong-il survives long enough to pour sufficient effort into securing the succession system, it will still be difficult to predict dramatic shifts in system stability that might be brought about by policy changes or unforeseen. No opposition against the succession will surface during his reign, and the

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<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, Cho Min argues that the North Korean Attack on the *Yonpyong* Island was intended and executed to almost coercively extract substantial military and economic assistance from China. Cho Min, "North Korean War Business and China's Choice," *KINU Online Series CO 10-46* (December, 2010).

successive government will be perceived simply as the 2<sup>nd</sup> government of Kim Jong-il.

As Brownlee argues, Kim Il-sung's charisma was strong enough to deter any opposition or divisions among the ruling elites during the previous succession process to Kim Jong-il.<sup>21</sup> However, Kim Jong-il's charisma is not as nearly strong as his demigod-like father, Kim Il-sung. As such, Kim Jong-un will not be able to capitalize upon his father's stature as Kim Jong-il did during his own succession, because the elites under Kim Jong-il have become more like a patrimonial entourage controlled around profits and fear rather than belief and respect for the leader.

Thus, the weakening power of the feared tyrant, Kim Jong-il will automatically shake up the elites' solidarity and of course their obedience to and respect for Kim Jong-un. If Kim Jong-il retires soon, a critical situation could develop where Kim Jong-un and the guardian cadre will immediately be exposed to the politics of cold and dry reality.

If Kim Jong-il's retirement comes sooner than expected, either due to illness or even death, it will increase conflict and tension within the regime. In other words, Kim Jong-un and his guardians will face power competition without being fully prepared to take control of the regime. The level of anxiety and uncertainty about the future will increase accordingly within the elite group,<sup>22</sup> and they will be the first ones to notice that 28-year-old Kim Jong-un lacks the reliable capacity to soundly lead the regime.

An abrupt absence of a strong leadership will create a security dilemma within North Korea's domestic politics. The early retirement of Kim Jong-il,

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<sup>21</sup> Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics* (Jul. 2007), pp. 595-628.

<sup>22</sup> International implications of the succession are outside this paper's scope since this paper focuses on analyzing North Korea's succession structure and domestic political dynamics. For some time, North Korea will have to concentrate on solidifying its internal structure for a successful succession, and foreign policy will be formulated and implemented as a means to support such efforts.

without establishing a successor with strong authority, will certainly make strongmen within the regime feel keenly uncertain about the future power distribution among competing rivals and factions. Thus, political consensus building, guaranteeing collective security as public good, will become an almost impossible task. The likely outcome of rising uncertainty might be unyielding power struggles and voices calling for preemptive attacks on competitors, in which self-help is the final principle for survival in the sudden advent of a Hobbesian world of mistrust and war. The sooner Kim Jong-il retires, the greater internal insecurity will be.

Such a situation could dramatically escalation tensions that might cause the regime to devolve into political chaos. More importantly, a revolution from the top becomes a possible scenario in the supposed situation. Once the anti-Kim faction assumes and secures national leadership, whether they are originally reform-oriented or not, new leaders might pursue opening and reform policies in order to win the hearts and minds of the general public, which remains discontented with the previous system and its power elites. In short, regime change may result in a total transformation of the state system.

Even if the succession process is completed according to its plan, it is doubtful that North Korea will be able to survive with its system unchanged. Many systemic problems have accumulated over time; growing pro-market forces *versus* the old system advocates; exploitive bureaucracy *versus* the increasingly dissatisfied public; weakening legitimacy for the authoritarian regime; prolonged failure of the North Korean economy in a predatory and parasitic way. These are problems by themselves, but more importantly, they may generate more severe problems when combined into an inherent weakness of the patrimonial ruling system, which is characterized by frequent political realignments and power struggles. In the mid- to long-term there is no way of guaranteeing the sustainable stability of the regime. While it is difficult to predict a sudden collapse, it appears clear that we are witnessing the arrival of an era of uncertainty.