

North Korean Leadership Dynamics and Decision-making under Kim Jong-un

A First Year Assessment

Ken E. Gause



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Eric V. Thompson, Ph.D.
Vice President and Director
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Executive summary

Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011 brought about the hereditary transition of power to a third generation. Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's youngest son, assumed the mantle of Supreme Leader. In a little over a year, he had acquired all of the titles of power, including Supreme Commander, First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, and First Chairman of the National Defense Commission. He is 30 years old.¹

This paper argues that Kim Jong-un, while the ultimate decision-maker and sole source of legitimacy for the regime, has yet to fully consolidate his power. While he may be invested with inherent legitimacy by virtue of his position as Supreme Leader, he still needs to grow into the position and learn how to effectively wield power. This is a process of demonstrating capability and relationship building that could take one to two more years. In fact, Kim Jong-un is currently involved in a three-phase process of consolidation.

- The first phase, which began shortly after he was formally designated the heir apparent (September 2010) and is drawing to a close, has focused on the stabilization of the three-generation hereditary succession. In this period, potential opposition to the hereditary transition in power has been stamped out through purges and retirements.

¹ Kim Jong-un's birth year has never been published in the North Korean media. According to the ROK Ministry of Unification, Kim was born on 08 January, but his birth year is assumed to be 1982, 1983, or 1984. Recently, Yoo Seong-ok, the president of the Institute for National Security Strategy, a think tank associated with South Korea's National Intelligence Service, stated that Kim was born in 1984. However, Dennis Rodman, following his most recent trip to North Korea in September 2013, said that Kim is 30 years old, thus he must have been born in 1983. See "Rodman Gives Details on Trip to North Korea," *New York Times*, 09 September 2013.

- The second phase, which began in earnest in 2013, is focused on Kim's steps to establish a power base, which owes its loyalty directly to him. This patronage system will likely be tied to moves to accommodate the twin regime policy philosophies of "Military First" and "Creating a Strong and Powerful Nation." It is likely that as this phase plays out and Kim Jong-un begins to exert his independence as a decision-maker, the current regent/advisory structure will begin to change—something that could lead to churn within the upper reaches of the leadership.
- The final phase, according to many Pyongyang watchers, should begin around 2015, when Kim Jong-un is able to assume the full responsibilities of his position as Supreme Leader. He will have established his own decision-making processes and will be more directly responsible for policy formulation and execution. He will most likely begin to marginalize his regents, which could intensify the opposition exhibited in phase 2.

If Kim Jong-un is able to survive this final period with his position intact, regime stability will probably be ensured for the foreseeable future. But, there is a possibility that his powers will be curbed or that he will become a puppet to powerful forces inside the regime. If this occurs, the stability of the regime could come into question.

This paper also outlines an idiosyncratic process that recent defector reporting suggests Kim Jong-un's regents may have put in place in order to educate the young leader on his new role, as well as to give him the situational awareness he needs as the ultimate decision-maker. History is full of examples of young, hereditary leaders who have been thrust into the crucible of leadership where they are forced to devise a system of rule that comports with the culture of the regime, as well as their unique leadership style. Given the fact that North Korea is a Supreme Leader (*Suryong*) based system where all power and legitimacy flows from one individual, any argument that Kim Jong-un is a figurehead with no real authority is most likely untrue. That said, he lacks the 30 years of preparation that his father had before he assumed the mantle of leadership following Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. In order to prepare Kim Jong-un for his awesome responsibilities, the regime has apparently put into place a unique decision-making model that is quite different from the in-

formal hub-and-spoke system Kim Jong-il relied on—something that is more formal and institution based.

- Strategic-level decisions are most likely discussed and made within a small group of Kim family members and trusted associates. This inner core is composed of Kim Jong-un and his three regents: Kim Kyong-hui, Jang Song-taek, and Choe Ryong-hae.
- Within this inner core, Kim Jong-un is the ultimate decision-maker. Kim Kyong-hui is the senior regent. She is responsible for her nephew's leadership education. She also safeguards the Kim family equities. Therefore, she has veto power over any decisions made at the senior level with the exception of those made by Kim Jong-un. Jang Song-taek has assumed the role of the "Control Tower," a role normally reserved for the Supreme Leader. Choe Ryong-hae, as the director of the General Political Bureau, is the most powerful figure in the high command, even though he does not have a military background. He is responsible for ensuring the loyalty of the armed forces. His reports to Kim Jong-un are direct, bypassing Jang Song-taek.
- As the "Control Tower," Jang Song-taek is responsible for running the day-to-day operations of the regime. He also has visibility of message traffic on its way up to Kim Jong-un. Jang can make comments on and prioritize these reports, but cannot change them in any way. He is most likely Kim Jong-un's senior advisor on policy. Jang (as Kim Jong-il once did as Supreme Leader) regularly interacts with various issue-oriented task groups, which are responsible for generating options and then reaching consensus on policy guidance. Jang uses this guidance to frame his discussions with Kim, and from these meetings senior-level decisions on policy are made. Politburo and other formal leadership bodies may feed into this process, but they are not decision-making bodies. At most, they can indicate the senior leadership's focus on a particular policy or in a particular direction.
- Soon after Kim Jong-il died, the regime reportedly established a forum for Kim Jong-un to discuss policy with key interlocutors throughout the regime. According to recent defector testimony, Kim convenes meetings on Tuesdays and Fridays. The Tues-

day meetings, which were originally organized by former Premier Choe Yong-nim (and may now be handled by Premier Pak Pong-ju) focus on domestic and social issues. The Friday meetings, which are organized by Kim Kyong-hui, are dedicated to national security issues. These meetings serve an educational function by giving Kim Jong-un a chance to discuss policy matters in greater detail with regime subject matter experts. They also allow him to develop the relationships he will need in order to eventually consolidate his power. Jang Song-taek does not attend these meetings.

- As for the formal leadership apparatus, before he died, Kim Jong-il reinvigorated the Party apparatus, including the Politburo and Central Military Commission. Since taking power, Kim Jong-un has utilized these bodies, allegedly as sounding boards for national-level policymaking.

Policy execution under Kim Jong-un has occurred in fits and starts. It is not clear whether this is because of a lack of top-down guidance or because policies have become hostage to the ongoing internal political battles taking place as part of the consolidation process. At the Central Committee Plenum in March 2013, Kim Jong-un attached his name to a new strategic line for simultaneous co-development of the country's nuclear program and economy—referred to as the “*byungjin*” line.

- On the national security front, policy seems to be tied to the development of critical defense systems, including the missile and nuclear programs. North Korean rhetoric, especially regarding the nuclear program, suggests that this policy comes with firm regime red lines. North Korea has declared itself a nuclear power and has been adamant in its discussions with the international community that it will not seek any engagement that would require it to walk back from this status. Beyond the political benefits the nuclear program has for Kim Jong-un's own legitimacy and the legacy of his father, Pyongyang has tied its nuclear deterrent to economic development through an expectation of being able to divert funds from the military sector to the civilian sector.
- As for the economy, the regime laid out a tentative agenda in June 2012 with specific measures aimed at limited reforms in

the agricultural and light industry sectors, as well as bringing together several hard currency operations under the Cabinet. Although Kim Jong-un, in his first public speech on the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, promised the nation that there would "no longer be a need for belt tightening" (an apparent suggestion that the days of the dominance of the Military First Policy may be coming to an end), there have been few tangible results. It remains to be seen whether any real movement toward economic reform is in North Korea's future.

This paper does not support any particular policy strategy toward North Korea. That would require an additional set of analyses that is beyond the scope of this effort. That said, this paper might be used to inform policy debates about what can be done about the North Korean problem. These debates often revolve around what strategy (combination of carrots and sticks) will entice or force Pyongyang "to do the right thing." In order to derive an effective strategy, certain assumptions need to be made about how North Korea will react. The ability to form such assumptions can only come from an informed understanding of leadership dynamics and equities. If policymakers assume that Kim Jong-un has not yet consolidated his power, they need to consider the viability of any strategy that leads to North Korea parting with its nuclear program. They also need to question any speculation that Kim will embark on meaningful economic reforms—something that would require Pyongyang to make itself hostage to international aid in order to secure the resources necessary to successfully ditch the top-down command economy. Once policymakers begin to examine the North Korean problem from Pyongyang's point of view, the "30,000-foot solutions" often heard in Washington, Beijing, and Seoul lose their resonance. Policymakers are left with two possible outcomes, both very unappetizing: either there will be a regime change, or they must wait until Kim Jong-un consolidates power. The latter outcome is far from a solution and depends on Kim having the political courage to embark on a fundamentally new path. That said, it will launch a new era when the regime can react to international carrots and sticks without fear of internal backlash. Only time will tell whether this means a regime that can be bargained with in a meaningful way.

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Introduction

It has been a year and a half since Kim Jong-il died and his third son, Kim Jong-un, assumed the reins of power in North Korea. Early in this process, Kim Jong-un received the titles of Supreme Leader and Supreme Commander of the armed forces. In April 2012, at the Fourth Party Conference and the follow-on Supreme People's Assembly, he received the additional titles of power: First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, Chairman of the Korean Workers' Party's (KWP's) Central Military Commission, and First Chairman of the National Defense Commission. But even with these trappings of power, questions remain regarding Kim's ability to run the regime and the workings of the decision-making process inside the North Korean leadership.

Decision-making in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has evolved over time to suit the needs of the Supreme Leader and the politics of the time. Under Kim Il-sung, decision-making, while the preserve of the Supreme Leader, took place within formal Party channels. This changed under Kim Jong-il, who eschewed formal leadership bodies, such as the Politburo, for a more informal decision-making process centered on his Personal Secretariat. In the months since Kim Jong-un took power, his age and capability for making decisions and managing the regime have been subject to speculation. Issues of North Korean political culture, which places extraordinary power in the hands of the Supreme Leader, have been weighed against the existence of powerful individuals and institutions that reside in close proximity to the young leader. Whether they have a decision-making role or simply serve in the role of *consigliere* is unclear.

This paper will examine the leadership dynamics surrounding Kim Jong-un's first year in power in an attempt to piece together the picture of how decision-making and policy execution work under the

new leader.² It will begin with a discussion of the politics of power consolidation and the centers of power within the regime. This will be followed by a speculative discussion of how decision-making might work and how policies are executed. Recent photographs of formal and informal leadership meetings have been presented in the North Korean media, but do they actually portray the decision-making process? The regime's red lines regarding policy and its calculus regarding provocation versus engagement will be considered both for what they say about stability within the regime and for any insights that could inform the United States' North Korea policy.

Sources

The research for this study has been ongoing since September 2010, when Kim Jong-un was formally announced as the heir apparent. The author interviewed skilled Pyongyang watchers throughout Asia who are adept at reading the subtle, and not so subtle, tea leaves associated with the North Korean leadership.³ Particularly useful was a trip to Seoul in April 2013, in which the author discussed recent North Korean leadership dynamics in depth with a number of subject matter experts in the government and leading think tanks. Some of these interviews were with defectors who brought a unique perspective and some fresh information to the discussions. These interviews added nuance to the paper and placed some of the arguments in context. Because these discussions were on background and off the record, the sources are not revealed in this paper.

This paper leverages past research that the author has conducted on the North Korean leadership, which can be found in the following studies:

² The research and analysis for this paper continued through August 2013. Additional information was added in the first weeks of September.

³ The term "Pyongyang watcher" is used in the context of this paper to refer to subject matter experts who focus particularly on the North Korean leadership—much akin to the distinction that was made in the Cold War where Kremlinologists were a subset of the broader community of Sovietologists.

- *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State* (Washington, DC: The U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Second Edition, May 2013, currently being translated into Korean by the Ministry of National Unification).
- “North Korea’s Political System in the Transition Era: The Role and Influence of the Party Apparatus,” in Scott Snyder and Kyung-Ae Park, eds., *North Korea in Transition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).
- *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).
- *North Korea After Kim Chong-il: Leadership Dynamics and Potential Crisis Scenarios* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, November 2011).
- “Can The North Korean Regime Survive Kim Chong-II?” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 20, no. 2 (June 2008).
- *North Korean Civil-Military Relations: Military First Policy to a Point* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, September 2006).

The paper also makes use of some close monitoring of the North Korean leadership being done by young, up and coming Pyongyang watchers. Michael Madden runs the well-respected blog *North Korean Leadership Watch*, which tracks leadership events and appearances. Luke Herman and a group of young Pyongyang watchers are using network analysis software to analyze North Korean leadership over the past 15 years. These analysts are doing vital spade work that gives the Pyongyang watching community some institutional memory on issues related to the North Korean leadership.

Finally, the author would like to express his gratitude to Syllas Lee, his research assistant in Seoul, who facilitated two sets of meetings in 2012 and 2013 and additional research in support of this paper. Without his assistance, this paper would not have been possible.

Organization

This paper is organized into five substantive chapters, following this introduction. It begins with a discussion of Kim Jong-un’s initial steps

at consolidation and how the regime leadership changed from the mourning period following Kim Jong-il's death through the reshuffles that took place in the summer of 2013. The next chapter examines how the North Korean regime operates and the nature of the Supreme Leader (*Suryong*) system. This is followed by a discussion of how the system has transformed under Kim Jong-un. The paper then examines the leadership around Kim Jong-un at the second, third, and fourth echelons, including an assessment of key individuals' access to the Supreme Leader. The final two chapters discuss decision-making in the regime, as well as the policymaking dynamics. The policy making chapter also touches on domestic and foreign/security policy and the red lines the regime may associate with each.

Initial steps at consolidation

The process of power consolidation in North Korea is long and complex. It is not simply a matter of the Supreme Leader designating his successor and the leadership falling in line behind that decision. In order to consolidate his power, a leader must not only conduct politics that sweeps away potential opposition and binds the wider leadership to him, but also solidify this allegiance by exhibiting an ability to execute policies that reflect well on the regime and bring benefits to his supporters. For Kim Il-sung, this process took nearly 25 years, ending with the adoption of the 1972 constitution that laid out his authorities as the Supreme Leader. Kim Jong-il spent nearly 20 years preparing the way for his own succession (with the support of his father). He consolidated his position in 1998, four years after his father's death, with the adoption of the so-called Kim Il-sung constitution that undergirded Kim family rule and laid the foundation for the hereditary transfer of power.

Although Kim Jong-il took measures to pave the way for the transfer of power to a third generation, much still needed to be done when he died on December 17, 2011. Over the course of 2012 and into 2013, Kim Jong-un and his supporters have embarked on a campaign to further transform the leadership. Surprising to many Pyongyang watchers, this exercise in power consolidation has moved at a rapid pace and included purges of officials considered close to Kim Jong-il. Some old faces have returned to the second and third echelons of power, which have raised questions about Kim Jong-un's policy proclivities. But in many cases, the rising stars are new officials whose direct loyalties are open to speculation.

The mourning period

In the days after Kim Jong-il's death, the leadership configuration that would shepherd in the new regime came into focus. It seemed to be made up of several rings with ties to the Party and the high command. The inner core was composed of several gatekeepers who presumably had some involvement in decision-making:

- **VMAR Ri Yong-ho**, as director of the General Staff Department (GSD), had operational control over the armed forces. A long-time associate of the Kim family, he oversaw one of the key support groups within the military that was supporting Kim Jong-un. This group was made up of officers in their 50s and 60s, generally considered to be the rising stars among the field commanders and high command. Many Pyongyang watchers presumed that, through this network, VMAR Ri would be instrumental in keeping the military in check during the transition period.
- **Gen. Jang Song-taek**, who had oversight of the internal security apparatus and the economy portfolio, was well situated to support Kim Jong-un in the running of the daily operations of the regime. He was versed both in policy execution and in the machinations revolving around personnel appointments that would be critical for Kim in consolidating his power.
- **Gen. Kim Kyong-hui**, in the period between her brother's death on December 17 and the final mourning ceremonies, jumped from 14th to 5th in the formal leadership rankings. She would likely play an advisory role and serve as a key arbitrator within the Kim family as well as the larger North Korean leadership.
- **Gen. O Kuk-yol** was a long-time Kim family loyalist. He, too, jumped within the power rankings, from 29th to 13th. His primary responsibility would be to ensure regime stability. His input into decision-making would likely be limited, but his opinion could carry weight in deliberations involving tradeoffs between reform and security.

The outer ring of this leadership configuration was apparently centered in the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC), which is made up of key second- and third-generation military and security officials from across the regime. Kim Jong-il's reinvigoration of the CMC at the Third Party Conference in 2010 had placed this body on par with the National Defense Commission (NDC) in terms of reach and influence. Under Kim Jong-un, Pyongyang watchers believed, the CMC would most likely replace the NDC as the command post of Military First Politics. It would be responsible for crafting the "great successor's" image, gathering loyalty toward the new regime, and

running the country. In terms of Kim's relationship with the military, three CMC members were particularly crucial during the transition period. All accompanied Kim Jong-un as he escorted his father's hearse through the streets of Pyongyang:

- **VMAR Kim Yong-chun**, as minister of People's Armed Forces (MPAF), oversaw the logistics and training of the military. He would serve, along with Jang Song-taek, as a key conduit to the NDC. In addition, he had past service in the KWP Organization Guidance Department (OGD) and the KPA's General Political Bureau (GPB), which gave him invaluable experience in sniffing out potential disloyalty within the armed forces. It was reportedly his surveillance in this regard that contributed to the staunching of the Sixth Corps incident in the mid-1990s.
- **Gen. Kim Jong-gak** was the acting head of the KPA's General Political Bureau (GPB), a responsibility he assumed with the death of Cho Myong-nok. According to North Korean leadership protocol during the Kim Jong-il period, the director of the GPB, which is the lead agency for ensuring Party control over the military, was the de facto third-ranking member in the high command, behind the heads of the MPAF and GSD.
- **Gen. U Tong-chuk**, as first vice director of the State Security Department, oversaw the country's powerful secret police. Gen. U was a leading member of a key support group to Kim Jong-un composed of general-grade officers within the security services.

Other individuals with military portfolios also stood out and bore watching, such as O Il-Jong (director of the KWP Military Department), Kim Kyong-ok (first vice director of the OGD for military affairs), and Choe Ryong-hae (KWP secretary for military affairs). They had important roles to play in monitoring the loyalty of the armed forces and ensuring a smooth transition. They would also be critical to creating and facilitating a unified and centralized Party guidance system that would invest the "great successor" with the ideological authority he would need to rule. Media coverage, however, did not suggest that they would be within Kim Jong-un's inner circle, at least initially.

Purges, demotions, and promotions

Things changed over the next four months. Most striking was the fate of several of the leaders who accompanied Kim Jong-un alongside his father's hearse.⁴ In March (2012), the South Korean press began to note that U Tong-chuk had not been seen in public since February.⁵ Then it was reported that he had suffered a stroke.⁶ A month later, on the eve of the Fourth Party Conference, Kim Yong-chun was relieved of his duties as minister of People's Armed Forces and given the less prestigious role as director of the KWP Department for Civil Defense.⁷ He was replaced by another member of the funeral proces-

⁴ "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Replaces All of the Military Gang of Four Who Escorted Kim Jong Il's Hearse," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 30 November 2012.

⁵ U Tong-chuk was last seen at the celebration of the Day of the Shining Star (Kim Jong-il's birthday) on February 16. U was removed from the National Defense Commission in April 2012. Although not mentioned publicly, South Korean intelligence sources told the media that he was also removed from his Party positions in the Politburo and Central Military Commission at the Fourth Party Conference. "In First Year, Taming The Army Was Kim's Goal," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 17 December 2012.

⁶ "Kim Jong Un's Closest Confidant U Tong-chuk Collapsed From Cerebral Hemorrhage," *YTN Cable TV Online*, 28 April 2012. There is another, more nefarious, story regarding U Tong-chuk's disappearance. According to South Korean intelligence sources, the 69-year-old U emerged in September 2009, when Kim Jong-un was officially rising as the next leader of the North. Whether at the orders of Kim Jong-il or on his own initiative, U began to construct a secret file on various North Korean leaders who could inhibit the heir apparent's rise to power. When Kim Kyong-hui learned of this secret file after her brother's death, she was surprised and apparently dismayed. She and her husband, Jang Song-taek, supposedly took measures to replace U and place the day-to-day control of the State Security Department [also referred to as the Ministry of State Security] in the hands of Kim Won-hong. "Weighing The Fall of Clique of U and Ri," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 23 July 2012.

⁷ Kim Yong-chun, while having been demoted, retains a key position within the regime. He is trusted by the Kim family for his past service. In 1995, Kim, with the support of Jang Song-taek (as first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department), suppressed the attempted coup d'état by the Sixth Corps. This formed a bond between the two that continues to this day. Even though Kim lost his portfolio as minister of People's Armed Forces, the de facto number two position in the mili-

sion, Kim Jong-gak, whose stature within the regime in the early months after Kim Jong-il's death appeared to be on the rise.

At the Fourth Party Conference in April 2012, it became apparent that the leadership that had been in place when Kim Jong-il died would not remain static. The Politburo was altered, with four members moving up significantly and seven others appearing to have been removed. The major winner was Choe Ryong-hae, who jumped from alternate Politburo status to a member of the Presidium. He was also made vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. Shortly before the meeting, Choe was promoted to vice marshal and put in charge of the General Political Bureau, filling the post left vacant by Choe Myong-nok's death.⁸

The Fourth Party Conference had one obvious loser—VMAR Ri Yong-ho, the chief of the General Staff. After rising dramatically through the leadership ranks at the Third Party Conference, he received no promotions or appointments. This led to many questions about his viability, which were answered in July with the most visible purge within the high command in years. VMAR Ri Yong-ho was removed from all of his posts, including member of the Politburo Presidium and vice chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission.⁹ The KCNA announcement, which attributed his re-

tary, he retains his posts on the Politburo and the Central Military Commission, and that of vice chairman of the National Defense Commission. Author's discussions in Seoul in 2012 and 2013.

⁸ Other winners included Kim Won-hong, Kim Jong-gak, Pak To-chun, and Hyon Chol-hae. Kim Won-hong, the new head of the SSD, and Hyon Chol-hae, vice minister of People's Armed Forces, were appointed to full Politburo status. Kim Jong-gak, the new minister of People's Armed Forces, and Pak To-chun, KWP secretary for defense industry, moved from alternate to full status in the Politburo.

⁹ The first indication that Ri's position was in trouble came in the weeks following Kim Jong-il's death. Ri figured prominently at the funeral ceremonies, walking alongside the hearse. However, during this period, rumors began to surface that were linked to stories of Ri's growing appetite for power and jaundiced view of Kim Jong-un as a viable Supreme Leader. Long considered an ally of Jang Song-taek, Ri was now increasingly described by many Pyongyang watchers as a competitor for influence over Kim Jong-un. Whether accurate or not, these stories gained

removal from power to illness, did not refer to his position as chief of the General Staff, but the appointment of Hyon Yong-chol to this post made it clear that Ri no longer was a member of the high command.¹⁰ Later reports suggested that Ri's dismissal was due to his opposition to the June economic measures and the transfer of various hard currency operations from the military to the Cabinet, a clear move to reorient the posture of Military First Politics, which had served as the operational doctrine for the regime under Kim Jong-il.¹¹

legs in the aftermath of the April leadership events in which Ri received no promotions, not even to the National Defense Commission, the one leadership body to which he did not belong. In addition, the new head of the General Political Bureau, Choe Ryong-hae, surpassed Ri in the formal rankings as he assumed key positions in the Politburo, Central Military Commission, and the National Defense Commission. No longer was the General Staff seen as the preeminent military body. It now took a back seat to the organization responsible for political indoctrination and ensuring the loyalty of the armed forces. Ri Yong-ho, however, continued to appear in public and even participated in the annual memorial ceremony commemorating Kim-Il-sung's death on July 8.

¹⁰ Gen. Hyon Yong-chol's rise was linked closely with Kim Jong-un. He had almost no public profile before September 2010 when he was promoted (along with Kim Jong-un) to four-star general. He appeared on the state funeral committees for Kim Jong-il and Cho Myong-nok. At the Central Committee Plenum in March 2013, he was appointed to the Politburo as an alternate member.

¹¹ According to the defectors associated with the North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity, Ri Yong-ho was purged at a meeting of the Politburo on July 15. At the meeting, there was a heated discussion on the "New Economic Reconstruction Policy," specifically on the transfer of economic projects from the Party and military to the Cabinet, and the reduction of the number of workers at collective farms among other issues. Jang Song-taek was briefing the policy when Ri pushed back, saying, "The policy is an ill-advised idea that denies the socialist principles that our previous supreme leaders followed and seeks to introduce capitalism instead. It is a plot aimed at funneling funds for modernization of the military for revolution to other uses." Jang responded that the policy had been formulated under the direct guidance of Kim Jong-un and accused Ri of challenging Kim's leadership. Kim Jong-un then stood up and stripped Ri of his title and rank on the spot and had him arrested, saying, "I cannot work for revolution with someone who doesn't follow me." See "Top NK General Ousted For Debating Economic Reform," *Dong-A Ilbo Online*, 31 July 2012.

Rumors that appeared in late 2012 indicate that Ri is currently under “house arrest” somewhere in North Hamgyong Province.¹²

In November, an even more surprising reshuffle occurred when VMAR Kim Jong-gak was replaced as minister of People’s Armed Forces by Gen. Kim Kyok-sik, a vice chief of the General Staff. Kim Jong-gak, while a fixture at the General Political Bureau in the Kim Jong-il era, began to rise within the high command soon after Kim Jong-un became heir apparent. He was appointed an alternate member of the Politburo and member of the KWP Central Military Commission at the Third Party Conference in 2010. On April 10, 2012, on the eve of the Fourth Party Conference, he was appointed minister of People’s Armed Forces, replacing Kim Yong-chun. In the days that followed, at the Fourth Party Conference and Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim was made a full member of the Politburo and a member of the National Defense Commission. His ranking within the leadership spiked from 24th to 7th. He was one of several officers with ties to the General Political Bureau to be appointed to high office, leading to speculation that Kim Jong-un was setting up a counterweight to Ri Yong-ho within the high command.¹³ He was included in a growing clique of younger-generation military officers and Party cadre tied to Jang Song-taek.¹⁴ On October 30 at a ceremonial wreath-laying before the anti-Japanese revolutionary Cho Kwang-su’s statue, the North Korean media suddenly quit referring to Kim Jong-gak by his title of minister of People’s Armed Forces, simply referring to him as “comrade Kim Jong-gak.” Kim then disappeared from public view until December 17, when he was mentioned as part of the delegation that accompanied Kim Jong-un and his wife, Ri Jol-su, to the renovated Kumsusan Palace of the Sun to pay respects to Kim Jong-il on the first

¹² “Kim Jong-un Still Trying to Get Control of The Military,” *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 19 November 2012.

¹³ “NK Names Armed Forces Minister to Keep Army Chief in Check,” *Dong-A Ilbo Online*, 12 April 2012.

¹⁴ Author’s interviews in Seoul, November 2012. Kim Jong-gak’s ties to Jang Song-taek were more as a cohort than a protégé. Both entered the Politburo as alternate members at the Third Party Conference. Pyongyang watchers did not tie Kim to Jang’s patronage system, but assessed that Jang “controlled” Kim through his position as vice chairman of the NDC.

anniversary of his demise.¹⁵ While Kim lost his seat on the NDC at the 7th Session of 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in April 2013,¹⁶ he continues to attend leadership functions and is rumored to currently hold the post of president of Kim Il-sung Military University, a trusted position from which to educate and influence the upcoming generation of military leaders.¹⁷

There was a great deal of speculation within Pyongyang-watching circles on these purges of military leaders that took place in 2012.¹⁸ One theory was that Kim Jong-un was trying to bring the high command under the Party's control. Another was that he was taking measures to pave the way for what would likely be unpopular economic measures.¹⁹ These may have been collateral motives, but an analysis of the high command appointments in 2012 suggests that Kim Jong-un was replacing those parts of the military leadership that were particularly close to his father, putting into place officers with whom he has close relationships and who owe their loyalty to him.²⁰ Under both

¹⁵ "Kim Jong Un Pays Respects to Kim Jong Il," KCNA, 17 December 2012. At this event, it was revealed that Kim Jong-gak had been reduced in rank to general. At a sports match on April 16, 2013, Kim Jong-gak again wore the rank of vice marshal. "Kim Cho'ng-kak Appointed as Military University Head," *Yonhap Online*, 16 April 2013.

¹⁶ KCNA, 01 April 2013. While not disclosed by the North Korean media, it is assumed that Kim Jong-gak also lost his post on the Politburo and maybe the Central Military Commission. This is based on his fall in the leadership rankings.

¹⁷ "Kim Cho'ng-kak Appointed as Military University Head," *Yonhap Online*, 16 April 2013.

¹⁸ According to South Korean sources, 31 senior-level military officers have been demoted or removed from their posts since Kim Jong-un came to power.

¹⁹ "South Korean Analysts Say Kim Eyes Reform in Purge of DPRK Military Old Guard," *AFP*, 19 July 2012.

²⁰ It should be noted that even Kim Jong-un's apparent appointees were not beyond punishment. Choe Ryong-hae was demoted from vice marshal to general in December 2012 and re-promoted to vice marshal in February 2013. Hyon Yong-chol was demoted from vice marshal to general in October 2012. Kim Yong-chol was demoted from general to colonel (or lieutenant) general in 2012 and re-promoted to general in February

Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, the heads of the GSD, MPAF, and GPB were critical to controlling the military. Kim Jong-il, working closely with Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek, engineered the most sensitive move within the high command when he appointed Choe Ryong-hae as director of the General Political Bureau. Choe's elevation at the Fourth Party Conference to the Presidium of the Politburo and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission placed the GPB ahead of the MPAF and GSD in the high command pecking order, setting into motion the changes that followed.

Kim Jong-un, probably with Choe Ryong-hae's support, chose Ri Yong-ho's replacement, Hyon Yong-chol, from obscurity. Hyon's rise from Eighth Corps commander to chief of the General Staff suggests close ties to the center of the regime. His rise through the ranks began in 2010 with the announcement of his promotion to four-star general alongside Kim Jong-un, Kim Kyong-hui, and Choe Ryong-hae. He was ranked 83rd on the funeral list for Cho Myong-nok (former director of the GPB) and 77th on the funeral list for Kim Jong-il. He also received the Order of Kim Jong-il as part of the ceremonies commemorating the late leader's 70th birthday in February. He was promoted to vice marshal only days before Kim Jong-un received the title of marshal at the end of July (2012).²¹

Kim Kyok-sik's career, while it predates Kim Jong-un's appointment as heir apparent, is tied to the succession. After apparently being demoted in February 2009 (one month after Kim Jong-un's status was announced within North Korean leadership circles) from chief of the General Staff to commander of the Fourth Corps, Kim oversaw the operations tied to the heir apparent's rise to power. From his position as commander of the western front, Kim Kyok-sik may have played a role in both the sinking of *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island—the first event was critical to the succession, and the second was designed to bolster Kim Jong-un's credentials as a military lead-

2013. Choe Pu-il, the recently appointed minister of People's Security, was rumored to have been demoted from general to colonel general in 2012. In April 2013, he was again listed as a general.

²¹ KCNA announced Kim Jong-un's appointment as marshal on July 18, one day after Hyon Yong-chol's promotion to vice marshal. For reasons still unclear, Hyon was demoted to a four-star general in October 2012.

er.²² He was made an alternate member of the KWP Central Committee at the Third Party Conference. In November 2011, he returned to the General Staff as a vice chief and, according to defector sources, following Kim Jong-il's death, he moved into Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat as a military advisor, a position he held until taking over the Ministry of People's Armed Forces.²³ At the Central Committee Plenum and Supreme People's Assembly in 2013, he was made an alternate member of the Politburo and a member of the National Defense Commission.

As noted above, the reshuffle extended beyond the military leadership to include senior officers responsible for internal security. Kim Won-hong's visible rise through the ranks began shortly after Kim Jong-un's designation as heir apparent. In February 2009, Kim Won-hong, the previous commander of the Military Security Command, became the director of the Organization Bureau of the KPA General Political Department as part of Kim Jong-il's apparent plan to begin to build support for his successor within the military elites. At the Third Party Conference, he was appointed to the KWP Central Military Commission. On the eve of the Fourth Party Conference, Kim was identified as the director of State Security (minister of State Security).²⁴ At the Party Conference and subsequent SPA meeting, Kim became a full Politburo member and member of the NDC.²⁵

²² While it is the prevailing view among Pyongyang watchers that Kim Kyok-sik had knowledge of the operational planning regarding *Cheonan*, there is little evidence to suggest that he had direct operational involvement. He was at most aware of the operation in order to respond to any South Korean retaliation. The operation itself was most likely overseen by the Reconnaissance General Bureau.

²³ Author's interview in Seoul, April 2013.

²⁴ Kim Won-hong's appointment as head of the SSD was significant because the North Korean media had previously avoided publicly identifying the official in charge of the secret police.

²⁵ According to some sources, Kim Won-hong's meteoric rise is due to the influence of Kim Kyong-hui, not Kim Jong-un. His role within the internal security apparatus suggests Jang Song-taek's influence as well. Author's interviews in Seoul in 2012 and 2013.

In 2013, appointments to the military and security leadership took an unexpected and complicated turn involving replacements of officers who had just emerged in key positions in 2012. Kim Jong-un (and his regents) completed the reorganization of the military leadership, bringing to the fore a mix of trusted officers and a new generation into the high command.²⁶ One long-trusted officer was Choe Pu-il, whose ties to the Kim family date back to the early Kim Jong-il era. Choe was appointed minister of People's Security, replacing Ri Myong-su. At the Third Party Conference, Choe was made a member of the KWP Central Military Commission, to which Kim Jong-un was appointed vice chairman.²⁷ At the Central Committee Plenum on March 31, 2013, Choe was elevated to alternate member of the Politburo. Two days later, at the Supreme People's Assembly, he was appointed a member of the National Defense Commission.

Col. Gen. Ri Yong-gil was identified in the North Korean media as the director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau in March 2013.²⁸ He appeared in a photograph of a briefing that Kim Jong-un was receiving on operations associated with the evolving crisis.²⁹ Ri's name

²⁶ The senior leadership in the North Korean military is mostly made up of men in their 60s, and with the recent changes, the older officers have been almost, but not entirely, supplanted. At the same time, the appointments of 2012 and 2013 appear to signify a move in favor of military leaders with field experience.

²⁷ According to the Ministry of National Unification, Choe was demoted in October 2012 from general to colonel general. It was speculated that this was connected to the defection of a North Korean soldier stationed near the Kaesong Industrial Complex—the reason also tied to Hyon Yong-chol's demotion. Choe's official biography released at the time of his appointment to minister of People's Security does not mention this demotion.

²⁸ *Nodong Sinmun Online*, 29 March 2013. It is not clear when Ri assumed the post of director of the Operations Bureau. According to some sources, Kim Myong-guk was replaced as director in 2012. Some reports stated that he had been replaced by Choe Pu-il. Therefore, Ri replaced either Kim Myong-guk in 2012 or Choe Pu-il in 2013. See "To Curb Jang Song Thae's Influence, Kim Jong Un Completely Reshuffles Core of the Military," 03 July 2012.

²⁹ The story associated with the picture listed three-star Col. Gen. Ri Yong-gil as the "director of the Operations Bureau." Previously, the North Korean

first appeared in the North Korean media with the announcement of his promotion to lieutenant general as part of the April 2002 promotion list. It is rumored that he assumed command of the Third Corps in this period, which is one of the operational units directly responsible for the protection of Pyongyang.³⁰ Like Choe Pu-il, Ri Yong-gil was made an alternate member of the Central Committee at the Third Party Conference. Before his current posting, Ri had been the Fifth Corps commander (2007-12). He had been cast in the limelight when he spoke at the Military Loyalty Pledge for Kim Jong-un, held on the one -year anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death (December 17, 2012). His name also appeared alongside Choe's in the Kim Jong-il funeral committee list.³¹

At the end of the March/April crisis, three additional changes occurred in the high command. Col. Gen. Pyon In-son, the commander of the Fourth Corps was replaced by Ri Song-guk. Pyon had steadily climbed the military ranks for two decades, becoming a vice minister of People's Armed Forces in 2010. He took over command of the Fourth Corps at the end of 2011. He also became a member of the KWP Central Committee in 2010 and his name appeared on the Cho Myong-nok and Kim Jong-il funeral committee lists. This suggested that his ties to the regime were established in the period as Kim Jong-

media never identified a current occupant of this position. The only time the Operations Bureau was mentioned was in profiles of officers who had held the position in the past. This story was also the first time that the North Korean media identified the existence of the Reconnaissance General Bureau and Gen. Kim Yong-chol as its director, or of Lt. Gen. Kim Rak-gyom as the commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces.

³⁰ The Third Corps, along with the Pyongyang Defense Command, play important Praetorian Guard functions and are dedicated to the protection of the capitol. As such, both commands are headed by politically reliable commanders with ties to the senior leadership. If Ri was a commander of the Third Corps, it suggests he has had long standing ties with the Kim family. Given the fact that Jang Song-taek's older brother, Chang Song-u was a former commander of the same corps, Ri may also have a relationship with the Jang family.

³¹ KCNA, 19 December 2011. Col. Gen. Ri Yong-gil's name was also a member of the Cho Myong-nok State Funeral Committee.

un was coming on the scene.³² He also had a high profile during the March/April crisis, accompanying Kim Jong-un on a visit to the two islets in the West Sea—something that could have contributed to his removal.³³ On July 25, the North Korean media in a report of a wreath laying at for Chinese fallen fighters that Pyon had returned to his post of vice minister of the People’s Armed Forces.³⁴ Not much is known about Ri Song-guk. His only appearance in the North Korean media was when he accompanied Kim Jong-un at a live-fire exercise aimed in the direction of a couple of ROK-held islands in the West Sea (March 2013).³⁵ Presumably he is a third-generation military leader with considerable operational experience, given that the Fourth Corps is a sensitive command in charge of an area that could be a flashpoint in inter-Korean relations.³⁶

At a performance of the Korean People’s Internal Security Forces’ Dance Ensemble on May 13, Col. Gen. Jang Jong-nam was identified as the new minister of People’s Armed Forces, replacing Gen. Kim

³² That said, Pyon In-son falls outside of the generational cohort that Kim Jong-un appears to be trying to bring into the high command. He became a lieutenant general in 1997 and a colonel general in 2003 (when he took over command of the Seventh Corps). He was also a delegate to the 11th and 12th Supreme People’s Assemblies, which suggests that his ties to Pyongyang were developed before Kim Jong-un became heir apparent.

³³ Initial analysis was that the regime appeared to be reshuffling commanders tied to the more strident actions that the regime has taken in the recent past. The fact that Pyon In-son and Kim Kyok-sik were replaced within days of the end of the March/April crisis suggested that the regime possibly wanted to move out in other policy directions (diplomacy and economy) without being weighed down by recent events. Kim Kyok-sik’s appointment as chief of the General Staff called this analysis into question.

³⁴ “Wreaths Laid Before Cemetery of Fallen Fighters of CPV,” KCNA, 26 July 2013.

³⁵ KCNA, 14 March 2013.

³⁶ “North Replaces Commander of Key Frontline Unit,” *JoongAng Daily Online*, 30 April 2013.

Kyok-sik.³⁷ This was the third appointment to this post in a little over a year.³⁸ Jang Jong-nam is the former commander of the First Corps (responsible for guarding the front lines in Kangwon Province).³⁹ His appointment continued a set of appointments designed to bring a new generation into the high command.⁴⁰ He was one of four corps commanders to speak at a loyalty rally of Korean People's Army (KPA) service members and officers on the one-year anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death in December 2012.⁴¹ He also spoke at a Party-army

³⁷ Kim Kyok-sik was last mentioned as minister of People's Armed Forces in an April 23 Pyongyang radio report on a banquet to commemorate the 81st founding anniversary of the Korean People's Army. Given the fact that he was appointed to both the Politburo and NDC in 2013, his removal from the Ministry of People's Armed Forces portfolio was obviously not tied to issues of loyalty.

³⁸ According to one source, the fact that the Ministry of People's Armed Forces has had four ministers since the beginning of 2012 (Kim Yong-chun, Kim Jong-gak, Kim Kyok-sik, and now Jang Jong-nam) may indicate that the senior ranks of the armed forces are unsettled.

³⁹ According to North Korean media, Jang Jong-nam was promoted to a one-star general (major general) in 2002 and two-star general (lieutenant general) in 2011. At the performance on May 13, 2013, the photograph showed Jang with three stars (colonel general) on his epaulets.

⁴⁰ Jang Jong-nam is in his 50s, while Kim Kyok-sik is 75.

⁴¹ Many in the international media speculated that Kim Kyok-sik was removed because he was "hawkish." This is a fundamental misreading of the North Korean high command where "hawkishness" is a matter of degree. Corps commanders have been highly indoctrinated, especially those from the third generation such as Jang Jong-nam. At a massive rally in Pyongyang in July 2011, Jang spoke forcefully against what the regime believed were provocations by South Korea: "Now that South Korean confrontation maniacs without equals in the world dared to perpetrate such extreme provocations as not ruling out even a war against the DPRK, there remains between the North and the South only physical settlement of returning fire for fire." See "Massive N. Korean Crowd Takes Part in Rally Against S. Korea," *Yonhap*, 04 July 2011. It should be noted that, according to some sources, at least four corps commanders (1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th) have been replaced since the beginning of 2013. Most of this reshuffle is tied to the senior level appointments made at the end of April and the beginning of May. "Kim Jong-un Replaces More Than Half of Corps Commanders Over Four Months in 2013," *Kungmin Ilbo Online*, 08 August 2013.

solidarity rally in July 2011, three months after he was promoted to lieutenant general on late DPRK President and founder Kim Il-sung's birthday in April 2011.⁴²

Days after Jang Jong-nam was identified as the new minister of People's Armed Forces,⁴³ the North Korean media identified Col. Gen. Jon Chang-bok as the new first vice minister during coverage of Kim Jong-un's visit to the 20 February Foodstuffs Factory of the Korean People's Army.⁴⁴ Jon apparently has replaced long-time Kim family associate (and Kim Jong-il military aide), VMAR Hyon Chol-hae.⁴⁵ Hyon had been appointed first vice minister and director of the KPA General Logistics Department in April 2012 and elevated to full membership in the Politburo and Central Military Commission.⁴⁶ Jon Chang-bok was Hyon's predecessor as director of the KPA General Logistics Department (GLD) and in August 2011,⁴⁷ he led a delegation of KPA logistical personnel to China and held talks with Defense Minister Liang Guanglie. It is not clear whether Jon has reassumed that post.

⁴² Like Ri Yong-gil, Jang Jong-nam was promoted to major general in April 2002. This suggests that Kim Jong-un is drawing from the cohort of officers in their 50s/60s and of the third generation, to staff the high command going forward. "North Korea Replaces Hawkish Armed Forces Minister," *Yonhap*, 13 May 2013.

⁴³ Jon Chang-bok's profile began to rise in 2010 when Kim Jong-un made his official debut. He was promoted to colonel general in April 2010, and, in September of that year, he was made a member of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea. He was a member of both Kim Jong-il's and Cho Myong-nok's funeral committees. He began to accompany Kim Jong-un on visits to military and economic units in April 2012.

⁴⁴ KCNA, 16 May 2013. See also "North Korea Replaces Vice Minister of Defense," *Yonhap*, 17 May 2013.

⁴⁵ In North Korean ministries with first vice ministers, there is only one first vice minister. Therefore, it appears that Hyon Chol-hae might have retired. South Korean reporting suggests that Hyon Chol-hae was replaced for health reasons. "North Korea replaces vice minister of the People's Armed Forces," *Chosun Ilbo*, 17 May 2013. That said, he has continued to appear at leadership functions.

⁴⁶ Hyon, 79, was regarded as one of the North's top military figures who helped support Kim Jong-un following the death of Kim Jong-il.

⁴⁷ Jon Chang-bok was director of the GLD from August 2011 to April 2012.

On May 22, in media accounts of “special envoy” Choe Ryong-hae’s departure for China, Kim Kyok-sik was identified as the chief of the General Staff, replacing Hyon Yong-chol, who reportedly has become the commander of the Fifth Corps.⁴⁸ Kim had held this position from 2007 to 2009 when he was moved out of Pyongyang to take over the Fourth Corps. This move, while highly unusual, appeared to bring to a close the reorganization of the high command that began with Ri Yong-ho’s dismissal. Hyon Yong-chol was most likely a placeholder until Kim Jong-un felt comfortable enough in his relations with the military to put his close aide Kim Kyok-sik into place. In addition, if the regime decided to shift focus away from Military First and toward diplomacy and economic development, having a noted hardliner with Kim Kyok-sik’s operational credentials as head of the General Staff (to backfill Choe Ryong-hae’s lack of credentials) would make it harder for the military to push back.⁴⁹ However, it did raise a question as to the relationship between Kim and Choe Ryong-hae, the other skilled political actor at the top of the military chain of command.

In August, the saga revolving around the post of chief of the General Staff took yet another twist. Although not confirmed by the time of this writing (August 2013), indications have surfaced in the North Korean media that Kim Kyok-sik has been replaced by Ri Yong-gil. In an August 29 report on a North Korean soccer match attended by Kim Jong-un and the leadership, Ri Yong-gil was listed fourth (after Jang Song-taek and before Minister of People’s Armed Forces Jang Jong-nam)—the position normally reserved for the General Staff head.⁵⁰ Kim Kyok-sik was not identified as one of those attending the event. Ri Yong-gil and Jang Jong-nam were also shown wearing four

⁴⁸ KCBS, 22 May 2013.

⁴⁹ The return of Kim Kyok-sik to the General Staff (albeit temporarily) served notice that the regime intends to be much more aggressive in controlling the operational commands, where much of the push-back was coming from following the Ri Yong-ho dismissal. It is not clear that Hyon Yong-chol had the gravitas and influence throughout the high command to enforce such control.

⁵⁰ According to one senior Pyongyang watcher, “In North Korea the listing of chief-of-staff and armed forces minister could be flipped, but there is no way the Director of Operations should be mentioned before the Minister.” See “Lee Young Gil On The Rise,” *The Daily NK*, 30 August 2013.

stars—the appropriate ranks for the Chief of the General Staff and Minister of People’s Armed Forces.⁵¹ While the reason for this apparent reshuffle has been the subject of widespread speculation in the South Korean media, it does not appear to be the result of a purge.⁵² It does suggest that Kim Jong-un continues to populate the formal political and military leadership with individuals who owe their loyalty directly to him while moving more senior leaders who have ties to both him and his father into the background. If this is true, Kim Kyok-sik may continue to play a vital role as an advisor behind the scenes (possibly within Kim Jong-un’s Personal Secretariat).⁵³

At the time of this writing (August 2013), Kim Jong-un’s control over the military is still in debate.⁵⁴ He has overseen a reorganization of the high command that appears to have unfolded in two moves. In 2012, officers seen as obstructionists or as owing their loyalty more to Kim Jong-il than to Kim Jong-un were replaced. This was followed in 2013 by adjustments through reappointments to critical positions and a continuation of bringing into the high command those officers who

⁵¹ Korean Central Television, 29 August 2013.

⁵² This speculation is supported by the fact that Kim Kyok-sik attended the Central Military Commission meeting that took place earlier in August. He was seated in the first row of military leaders next to Jang Jong-nam, apparently in his role as chief of the General Staff.

⁵³ Kim Kyok-sik’s removal from such a prominent position within the high command could also assist in the regime’s diplomatic outreach, something that was probably undermined by Kim’s attachment to the events of 2010.

⁵⁴ There are several patronage systems that make up the high command. These systems are headed by officers close to the Kim family. At the beginning of the Kim Jong-un regime, the major patronage systems were tied to O Kuk-ryol, Hyon Chol-hae, Ri Yong-mu, and, to a lesser extent, Ri Yong-ho. Some have argued that Jang Song-taek, via his late brothers who were military officers, also has a patronage system. If this speculation is true, Kim Jong-un (maybe with Jang Song-taek’s support) may have decapitated those systems tied to Hyon Chol-hae and Ri Yong-ho. Ri Yong-mu has been retired in place for years, and his patronage system may have atrophied. The important question is whether O Kuk-ryol has been marginalized or remains a critical player inside the regime. The view of the South Korean Pyongyang-watching community is sharply divided on this issue.

either had established ties with Kim Jong-un or owed their loyalty directly to him because he personally brought them into the center. These moves call into question rumors about Kim being controlled by the military (especially in the wake of the March-April crisis). There are no overt signs of disloyalty within the high command. The removal of high-profile members of the high command and appointments of relatively unknown and politically weak officers will likely bolster the power of the General Political Bureau,⁵⁵ which is responsible for ensuring the high command's loyalty to the Party and Supreme Leader.⁵⁶ Appointments of trusted aides such as Kim Kyok-sik (even though he now appears to have been replaced, but likely continues to wield influence from the shadows) not only will ensure a politically astute command and control mechanism over operational forces, but also will position Kim Jong-un to begin (with the General Staff's assistance) to extend his relationship-building down to the second- and third-echelon members of the officer corps. This is criti-

⁵⁵ This theory is opposed by recent stories purporting to be based on information inside North Korea. They talk of factionalism within the North Korean leadership around Kim Jong-un. Choe Ryong-hae, along with Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek, belong to a moderate faction, which is opposed by the KWP Organization Guidance Department and the high command. According to this theory, the moderate faction reached a zenith in its power with the downfall of Ri Yong-ho. However, the hard line faction regrouped and has been successful in pushing its agenda, which included the missile launch in December (2012) and the third nuclear test in February (2013). The return of Kim Kyok-sik as chief of the General Staff was seen by some as undermining Choe Ryong-hae's authority—a view that now appears somewhat suspect given Kim Kyok-sik's apparent removal from this post. See “The Rise of Moderate and Hardline Factions in North Korea,” *op.cit.*

⁵⁶ According to several sources, Kim Jong-un and his advisors were thrown off balance by the blowback from the Ri Yong-ho purge. This accounts for the lack of follow-through with the June Economic Measures in 2012 and the spike in references to the “Military First Policy” in the North Korean media. Since Ri Yong-ho's dismissal, one source notes that the Party's control over the high command has become much stricter. See Chong Song-chang, *DPRK Leadership Under Kim Jong-un* (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 2012).

cal because if Kim Jong-un is ever to fully assume the role of Supreme Leader, he will need the unwavering support of the military.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ For an interesting article on the recent history of North Korean military promotions, see “Military Promotions in the DPRK,” *North Korea: Witness to Transformation*, 13 August 2013. This blog entry provides a trend chart of major military promotions from 1997 to 2013. Since 2010 when the regime began to lay the foundation for the Kim Jong-un succession, there have been 206 major military promotions. Since Kim Jong-un came to power in 2012, there have been 147 (possibly 148, if Kim Kyok-sik has been replaced) major promotions.

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How the regime operates

Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power not only manifests itself through purges and appointments. He also must pay deference to a unique political culture. The North Korean system operates by a set of rules established in the Kim Il-sung period and adjusted to fit the style of rule under Kim Jong-il. At its heart, this *Suryong* (or "leader") based system is built around one individual's ability to make all of the decisions and command all of the power. At present, Kim Jong-un is growing into the role of Supreme Leader. He did not have the 20 years his father had to shape the regime to follow his lead. He and his regents have had to make adaptations in order to rule until he is able to consolidate his power. It will be another year or two until he will be able to make decisions and conduct politics on his own. This section of the paper will analyze how the regime currently operates. It will first examine the leadership culture in North Korea, which is encapsulated in the so-called *Suryong* system. This will be followed by a discussion of how relevant this culture is in the Kim Jong-un era. Finally, the paper will look at the various individuals around Kim Jong-un. Particular attention will be paid to the role of the regents around Kim, as well as his personal apparatus. In the following chapter, the paper will examine the key individuals within the wider North Korean leadership at the second, third, and fourth echelons of power.

The *Suryong* system⁵⁸

One of the most peculiar features of the North Korean system is the supreme authority of the "leader" in every domain, including ideology, law, administration, and regulations. For this reason, the North Korean political system is often called "*Suryongje*" ("a leader-dominant

⁵⁸ This section of the paper draws from the author's previous work. See Ken E. Gause, "North Korea's Political System in the Transition Era: The Role and Influence of the Party Apparatus," in Scott Snyder and Kyung-Ae Park, eds., *North Korea in Transition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

system”) or “*Yuil Cheje*” (“a monolithic system”).⁵⁹ In 1949, Kim Il-sung designated himself *Suryong* and began a campaign to eliminate all opposition to his position as the unbridled leader of the nation. He started to construct the ideological bulwark to support his status within the leadership in the mid-1950s with the unveiling of a Marxist-Leninist model for self-reliance called *Juche*. It became the principal ideology for politics, economics, national defense, and foreign policy, and is still the foundation of the regime today. The *Juche* ideology served as a catalyst among North Koreans, whose history is replete with dominance and subjugation by other nations. This ideology became a rallying cry for nationalism and isolationism, allowing Kim both to distance himself from Moscow and Beijing and to undercut Party members more closely aligned with the two patron nations. By 1956, Kim achieved unchallenged dominance in the Korean Workers’ Party, tightly controlling all aspects of both politics and society.⁶⁰ This was further inculcated in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the institution of the “*Suryong’s* Monolithic System of Guidance,” which was designed to lay the groundwork for the transfer of power from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Cheong Seong-chang, “Stalinism and Kimilsungism: A Comparative Analysis of Ideology and Power,” *Asian Perspective* 24, no. 1 (2000). It is important to note that the title “Leader” (*Suryong*) is reserved for Kim Il-sung. Kim Jong-il never adopted the title. In this paper, the word “*Suryong*” is used to denote the system within which Kim Jong-il operated and Kim Jong-un now operates.

⁶⁰ Kim Il-sung solidified his control over his own partisan faction with purging of the Kapsan faction members in 1967. This spelled the end of all opposition within the Party to Kim’s cult of personality. After that, Party bureaucrats of the Manchurian guerrilla group, who were loyal to Kim Il-sung, took leadership positions, and thereafter North Korean politics stabilized. Cheong Seong-chang, “Stalinism and Kimilsungism: A Comparative Analysis of Ideology and Power,” *op. cit.*

⁶¹ The Monolithic Guidance System was created in the late 1960s by Kim Yong-ju, Kim Il-sung’s younger brother and then director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department, and adopted and modified in the 1970s by Kim Jong-il. It called on North Koreans “to unconditionally accept the instructions of the Great Leader, and to act in full accordance with his will.” Kim Il-sung also demanded from Party members that they

As was made clear by North Korean propaganda, “The *Suryong* is an impeccable brain of the living body, the masses can be endowed with their life in exchange for their loyalty to him, and the Party is the nerve center of that living body.”⁶² This statement was clearly made manifest during the Kim Il-sung era as most policymaking at the national level was realized through official decision-making institutions, which met more or less on a regular basis. At the top of this infrastructure was the Party’s Political Bureau (Politburo), where senior-level debates were held and Kim’s thinking was fleshed out.⁶³ These

“fight to the end to protect to the death the authority of the ‘Party Center’ (*tang chungang*) [Kim Jong-il].”

Central to the Monolithic Guidance System is the “Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System.” The Ten Principles, which were formulated in the 1970s by Kim Jong-il as guidelines for Kim family rule, are defined in North Korean textbooks as: “The ideological system by which the whole party and people is firmly armed with the revolutionary ideology of the *Suryong* and united solidly around him, carrying out the revolutionary battle and construction battle under the sole leadership of the *Suryong*.” Until recently, they were based on the thoughts and deeds of Kim Il-sung. According to defector reports, Kim Jong-il’s name has been added to the description of this leadership structure. The second principle, which used to state that “We must honor the Great Leader comrade Kim Il-sung with all our loyalty” has been amended to state “We must honor the Great Leader comrade Kim Il-sung and General Kim Jong-il with all our loyalty.” This is most likely part of the regime’s attempts to create the ideological foundation for Kim Jong-un’s rule by creating the bridge between him and his grandfather. See “NK Adds Kim Jong Il to ‘Ten Principles,’” *Daily NK*, 11 August 2013.

⁶² Masayuki Suzuki, “Bukhanui ‘Sahoejeongchijeok Saengmyeongche’ron” (The Theory of a Socio-political Organism in North Korea), in Han Sik Park, ed., *Bukhanui Silsangwa Jeonmang* (North Korea in a Changing World Order) (Seoul: Donghwa, 1991).

⁶³ After Kim Il-sung’s unitary ruling system was established in the late 1960s, the Political Bureau ceased to be a collective consultation body. It became a rubber stamp where only the voices of Kim’s loyal supporters were heard. Nevertheless, it remained a body where “constructive opinions” (i.e., those that fit within the boundaries of Kim’s own thinking) often broadened Kim’s thinking. Hyon Song-il, *Pukhan-u’i Kukkaajo’lyakkwa P’awo’ Ellit’u’* [North Korea’s National Strategy and Power Elite] (Seoul: Sunin Publishing, 2006). Hyon Song-il is a former North Korean diplomat and paternal nephew of VMAR Hyon Chol-hae. He defected to

decisions were enforced by the Secretariat through the unified *Juche* Party doctrine and ubiquitous Party Committee system.

It is within this leadership system that Kim Il-sung engineered his succession. This was made clear by the code phrase “Party Center” (*tang chungang*) used by the regime in the 1970s to refer to the heir apparent, Kim Jong-il.⁶⁴ Kim Jong-il started his career in the Party; his support network was firmly ensconced in the Central Committee apparatus; and his succession took place within the Party structure.

As in other Communist systems, a political regime exists alongside the ruling apparatus. While the government and the military can take part in the ruling of the country, power is defined and emanates from the political regime. For Communist systems, this political regime resides within the Communist Party. It is only through the Party apparatus that the heir apparent can learn how to wield power. In 1973, at the Seventh Plenum of the Fifth Central Committee, Kim Jong-il was appointed to the KWP Secretariat with the portfolios for both Propaganda and Agitation and Organization and Guidance, the two key posts within the Party apparatus. The former allowed him to craft the message of the regime, while the latter ensured that the regime would firmly adhere to the notion of Kim family rule and embrace the idea of a dynastic succession.

Ultimately, it was only through the Party apparatus that the heir could eventually consolidate his position as the *Suryong* in waiting. At the Sixth Party Congress in 1980, Kim Jong-il moved into the upper echelons of the decision-making apparatus through appointments to the Presidium of the Politburo and the Central Military Commission. On-

South Korea in 1996 and is currently working for the Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul.

⁶⁴ The term “Party Center” entered the North Korean vernacular at the time of the Eighth Plenum of the Fifth Central Committee in February 1974. Before then, the phrase was rarely used in North Korean mass media. It later became personified as *Nodong Sinmun* increasingly cited the “Party Center” (*tang chungang*) as the brains behind numerous socialist construction guidelines. See “Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Instigation,” *Nodong Sinmun*, 13 February 1974. See also Morgan E. Clippinger, “Kim Jong-il in the North Korean Mass Media: A Study of Semi-Esoteric Communication,” *Asian Survey* 21, no. 3 (March 1981).

ly Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung held positions in the KWP's three leadership bodies: Politburo, Secretariat, and Central Military Commission. While Kim Jong-il was officially ranked fifth within the North Korean leadership, his credentials as heir were readily apparent.

As Kim Jong-il inherited more of his father's power and authority, the leadership system changed in important ways. Institutionally, Kim shifted the center of gravity within the Party from the Politburo to the Secretariat, his base of power.⁶⁵ Decision-making on all policies and personnel appointments was transferred to the Party Secretariat Office and specialized departments, while the Politburo was reduced to a rubber stamp for ratification.⁶⁶

It is one thing to consolidate one's power as heir apparent in North Korea's *Suryong*-dominant Party-state system. It is quite another thing to hold onto that power as the succession moves into its final phase and the heir has to assume more responsibility for running the regime and preparing to assume the role of leader after the passing of his predecessor. In the case of Kim Jong-il, the final phase of the succession began in the early 1990s. During this phase, the regime transformed its operating procedures to prepare for the transfer of power. Kim Jong-il's ruling power began to eclipse that of Kim Il-sung. His situational awareness was further enhanced as he took control of running the day-to-day affairs of the regime. And while Kim Jong-il

⁶⁵ In 1994, 29 out of 50 North Korean elites had worked for the KWP Politburo. This means that this body was an important stop on the road to advancement. In 2006, however, only eight members of the elite had served in the Politburo. A South Korean intelligence official explained: "Since 1993, Chairman Kim has not reorganized the Politburo, which has a lot of empty positions due to deaths, purges, and defections. Furthermore, the Politburo itself is being overshadowed by the Secretariat." "Analysis of the DPRK Power Group (2)—Route to the Heart of Leadership," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 05 January 2007.

⁶⁶ Toward the end of the Kim Il-sung period, policy consultation within formal leadership circles became perfunctory, replaced by a reporting mechanism whereby policy drafts were drawn up by each ministry and department and passed directly to Kim Jong-il's office, where they were prioritized and, if deemed worthy, passed to Kim Il-sung. The Political Bureau was convened only to ratify decisions that had already been made by the Kim duopoly.

maintained Kim Il-sung's policies, he began to add his own imprimatur. These aspects of the succession were for the most part contained within the Party apparatus.

But for the transfer of power to take place, Kim Jong-il needed to assert his control over the military. This could only be done by revising the North Korean political regime. No longer would the *Suryong* rule through the Party.⁶⁷ Now he would take a more direct role in ruling the government and military. Only through an undiluted command and control system could Kim Jong-il ever hope to reach the level of his father in terms of garnering respect and asserting guidance. In 1991, Kim was appointed Supreme Commander of the armed forces. This was a technical violation of the 1972 constitution, which stipulated that this position was intrinsically linked to that of the President, a post still held by Kim Il-sung. This provision was removed during the 1992 revision of the constitution, which also elevated the National Defense Commission (NDC) in status.⁶⁸ In 1993, Kim Jong-il became the chairman of the NDC.

After Kim Il-sung's death, this division of labor became more entrenched into the system as Kim Jong-il began to deal with a crumbling economy. It quickly became apparent that the Party was not up to the task of dealing with this crisis. In a speech to Party members in December 1996 at Kim Il-sung University, Kim Jong-il bitterly criticized the Party for being debilitated, using terms such as *Noin-dang* ["Elderly Party"] and *Songjang-dang* ["Corpse Party"]. According to defector reports, Kim even threatened to disband the Party during an

⁶⁷ A number of epithets denoting Kim Jong-il's elite status began to appear in the months after his formal designation as heir apparent. The North Korean media labeled him "Dear Leader" (*ch'inaehanun chidoja*) in November 1980, an apparent analog to his father's "Great Leader" (*widaehan suryo'ng*). According to the Open Source Center, other epithets followed, such as "successor" (*kyesu'ngja*) in May 1981, "respected and beloved Kim Jong-il" (*kyo'ngaehanun Kim Jong Il*) in April 1982, and "father Kim Jong-il" (*o'bo'i Kim Jong Il*) in January 1992. As noted above, Kim Jong-il never adopted the title "Leader" (*Suryong*), which was reserved for his father.

⁶⁸ The Supreme Commander was now intrinsically linked to the post of Chairman of the NDC.

informal meeting in 1997.⁶⁹ He also reportedly castigated the Party for “not dealing properly with the food shortages in the country,” and contended that he “did not owe anything to the Party.”⁷⁰ The Party’s inability to function was revealed in October 1997, when Kim Jong-il bypassed established Party rules to assume the mantle of General Secretary of the Korean Workers’ Party. This was done not through the convening of a plenary meeting of the KWP Central Committee, but through a joint endorsement by the Party’s Central Military Commission and Central Committee.⁷¹ By eschewing the Central Committee process and not accepting the title of General Secretary of the Central Committee, but rather taking that of General Secretary of the KWP, Kim placed himself firmly above the Party apparatus and gave notice that, unlike his father, he would not rule through the Party.

The 10th Supreme People’s Assembly convened in Pyongyang on September 5, 1998. It had three items on its agenda: revise the North Korean Constitution, re-elect Kim Jong-il chairman of National Defense Commission, and appoint officials to posts throughout the government. Although not described as such, the meeting was the ushering-in of a new ruling structure—the Kim Jong-il ruling structure.

The revised constitution made Kim Il-sung the “eternal President” (*chusok*) of North Korea,⁷² ending speculation on when his son would

⁶⁹ *Wolgan Chosun*, April 1997.

⁷⁰ Jae Jean-suh, “Possibility for WKP to Take Back Role of Decision-making,” *Vantage Point* 33, no. 8 (August 2010).

⁷¹ The Central Military Commission’s ability to endorse Kim Jong-il as General Secretary was apparently made possible by a revision to the KWP rules in 1982 in which the CMC was elevated in status equal to that of the Central Committee. Some Pyongyang watchers, however, dispute the fact that the Central Military Commission was now referred to as the Party Central Military Commission meant that it was no longer subordinate to the KWP Central Committee. Regardless of this issue, Kim’s assumption of this portfolio seemed to violate Article 24 of the KWP rules, which states that a plenary meeting of the KWP Central Committee should elect the General Secretary.

⁷² The abolition of the presidency did not mean the removal of the three vice presidents (Ri Chong-ok, Pak Song-chol, and Kim Yong-ju) from the leadership. Instead, they were appointed honorary vice chairmen of the

succeed him to the top state post. Instead, Kim Jong-il chose to continue the pattern begun in 1992 of concentrating authority in the National Defense Commission. The new structure left little doubt that the NDC was Kim's organizational base from which to implement military-first politics. The NDC was elevated to the highest organ of state, and the position of NDC chairman to the highest position in government.⁷³ Many Pyongyang watchers considered the status of the NDC chairman to be as high as that of the Politburo. Kim Jong-il over the years issued directives in the name of the NDC.

The NDC assumed the responsibility for the defense and security of the country. Its members carried portfolios for military affairs, defense industry, and internal security. The emergence of the National Defense Commission as the highest organ of state authority, however, did not signify, as many thought, the creation of an official policy consultative body to replace the now defunct Party Politburo. No evidence, either through defector channels or in grey literature, suggests that the NDC ever met as a collective decision-making body—something that still holds true at the time of this writing (August 2013). At most, instructions occasionally came down to the close aide network under the title “NDC chairman's order,” which suggested that Kim Jong-il used the NDC membership as a coordinating mechanism for particular, national security related issues.

The leadership system under Kim Jong-un

In the months after Kim Jong-il's stroke in August 2008, the regime began to grapple with the implications of his leadership model, which was informal in its structure and tied intimately to one man. How would it be possible to pass this model to a new leader who lacked the connections and power that Kim possessed? When Kim's choice of his third son, Kim Jong-un, as his successor became known within leadership circles in 2009, these issues became magnified. Not

SPA Standing Committee, positions that signaled their withdrawal from front-line political affairs. *Chungang Ilbo*, 07 September 1998.

⁷³ Kim Yong-nam described the chairmanship of the NDC as being “the highest rank of the state,” responsible for commanding politics, defense, and the economy, and as being a “sacred position signifying the dignity of the state.”

only was Kim Jong-un in his late 20s, but he had only been involved in regime affairs for a few years.

Resurrecting the Party

In order to deal with this challenge, Kim Jong-il adopted a two-prong strategy. First, he took steps to create a formal structure around the heir apparent by resurrecting the Party leadership apparatus.⁷⁴ The Third Party Conference (September 2010) announced new appointments to the Politburo, Secretariat, Central Military Commission, and Central Committee. These new appointments revitalized the moribund Party structure and gave Kim Jong-un a thriving bureaucracy dedicated to executing its role of policy oversight. The fact that these leadership bodies would now meet on a [somewhat] regular basis and issue directives would give an air of legitimacy to decisions that Kim Jong-un would make in the future.

The Party Conference also attempted to knit together Military-First Politics and the “Party Center” (the designation for the heir apparent) to create a sustainable leadership that would support the succession. The Central Military Commission (CMC) was newly defined in the Party Charter as “organizing and leading all military operations.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, the new charter stipulated that the chairman of the commission would be concurrently held by the Party’s General Secretary. This upgrade suggested that the Party’s military body would become a critical institution from which the heir apparent might consolidate his power, for the move would allow him to control both the Party and the military when he eventually became General Secretary. Finally, a reference to Military-First Politics (*Songun*) was inserted into the charter, which now read that “the Party will establish military-first politics as a basic political system of socialism.”⁷⁶ For many Pyongyang watchers, this latter revision validated the transfor-

⁷⁴ Cho Young-seo, “The Distinctive Nature of the Kim Jong-un Regime in North Korea and Prospects for Change,” *Vantage Point*, Vol. 36, No.9 (September 2013).

⁷⁵ The current status of the KWP Central Military Commission remains a point of contention among Pyongyang watchers. Some believe that the CMC was placed back under the Central Committee.

⁷⁶ Workers’ Party of Korea [WPK] Charter [*choso'n rodongdang kyuyak*], 28 September 2010, as published in *North Korea Tech*, 21 January 2011.

mation in the hierarchy of power from Party-government-military that existed under Kim Il-sung to the current Party-military-government.

Role of the regents

Second, Kim Jong-il surrounded his son with regents who could assist his decision-making and instruct him in the art of conducting politics inside the North Korean regime. Since Kim's death, this inner core has changed with the purge of Ri Yong-ho and the evolving role of O Kuk-ryol within the regime. According to most Pyongyang watchers, this inner circle around Kim Jong-un is composed of three regents who serve as the gatekeepers, ensure his situational awareness, assist him in developing critical relationships, and guide his decision-making.⁷⁷ All three have their own functional responsibilities and influence.

⁷⁷ It should be noted that this is only one theory of how power and politics works at the highest leadership level around Kim Jong-un. It is based on the notion that senior level command and control has carried over from the Kim Jong-il era where there is no viable opposition to the Supreme Leader, only degrees of influence. As mentioned earlier, this theory is opposed by one that is coming out of North Korea via informant channels, which argues that there are confrontations occurring within the senior leadership over how to proceed within the guidance laid down by Kim Jong-il. The moderate faction, headed by Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek, reportedly stress the importance of developing the economy as the best strategy for achieving a "strong and prosperous nation." The hard line faction, led by elements within the KWP Organization Guidance Department and the military, insist on developing the country's critical defense systems (missile and nuclear) in the name of *Songun*.

The problem is both of these lines were highlighted in Kim Jong-il's thinking toward the end of his life. This could account for the new, dual development strategy, the so-called "*byungjin*" line, which stresses the need to make progress on both the economy and nuclear power. While the moderate faction was in the ascendancy early on in the Kim Jong-un era, this theory contends, the recent missile and nuclear tests reportedly suggest that the hard line faction has gained in influence. This theory also suggests that while Kim Jong-un may be surrounded by regents from the moderate faction, the individuals and institutions directly responsible for his personal protection fall into the hard line camp. See "The Rise of Moderate and Hardline Factions in North Korea," *Sankei Shimbun*, 01

- **Kim Kyong-hui (67)** has emerged as the premier regent and wields the most influence with Kim Jong-un.⁷⁸ According to one source, she is the only person allowed to verbally discuss policy

August 2013. The author would caution against reading too much into stories of factionalism inside North Korea. While this could be a new phenomenon that is emerging in the Kim Jong-un era, it runs counter to much that of what the Pyongyang watching community understood of North Korean politics in the recent past. As one South Korean intelligence official and long-time Pyongyang watcher once noted, “Inside the North Korean leadership, there are no factions, only winners and losers.”

⁷⁸ Reports began to surface in the South Korean media in July (2013) that Kim Kyong-hui was critically ill. At that time, she had not been seen in public for over 80 days. She did not attend the important memorial event at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun on July 8 for the 19th anniversary of Kim Il-sung’s (her father’s) death. She eventually reappeared as part of the celebration ceremonies for the 60th anniversary of the truce that ended the Korean War. At the opening ceremony for the Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs’ Cemetery in Pyongyang on 25 July, she stood two spaces to the left of Kim Jong-un, next to Premier Pak Pong-ju. See “Kim Jong-un’s ‘Sick’ Aunt Resurfaces,” *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 27 July 2013.

Kim has a reported history of alcoholism and depression, which was exacerbated in the mid-2000s with her marital problems and the death of her daughter, Jang Kum-song, who committed suicide in 2006. Some reports claim that she is also suffering from hypertension and diabetes. “Kim Jong-un’s Aunt Critically Sick,” *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 22 July 2013. It should be noted, however, that rumors of Kim Kyong-hui’s health problems have been circulating for years. As *North Korean Leadership Watch* notes, these rumors are often squelched when Kim appears after a prolonged absence. The website also suggests another reason for Kim’s absence from public view in the summer of 2013. According to the website: “Her last observed appearance was prior to a long period of inspection tours outside of Pyongyang. It also occurred as a number of central Party secretaries and department directors disappeared from DPRK state media, some of whom later resurfaced during Kim Jong Un’s visit to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation (Korean) War, reported on DPRK state media on 11 July. Madame Kim’s absence may also be linked to the rumored establishment of the Department of the Economy in the Party Central Committee apparatus.” See “The Semiannual Rumor that Kim Kyong Hui Knocks at Death’s Door,” *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 24 July 2013.

with Kim Jong-un; others must make their suggestions in written form.⁷⁹ She is responsible for coaching Kim Jong-un on how to conduct politics and takes the lead in ensuring that he develops the critical relationships throughout the regime that he will need in order to rule on his own. As a blood relative and the keeper of Kim Jong-il's last will and testament, she is responsible for ensuring that the Kim family equities are respected and protected. In this capacity, she apparently has veto power over all decisions except those made by Kim Jong-un himself. How she uses this veto power (either on her own or through Kim Jong-un) is not clear.⁸⁰ Her health is rumored to be growing worse, although she still manages to make appearances at critical leadership events.



Kim Jong-un and Kim Kyong-hui at the National Light Industry Meeting in March 2013. (Source: Korean Central Television)

⁷⁹ Kim Yun-hee, "The Life of a Kingmaker: Kim Kyung-hui in Close-up," *The Daily NK*, 11 July 2013. Kim Yun-hee was born in North Korea (Pyongyang) and came to South Korea in 2012.

⁸⁰ Author's discussions in April 2013 with ROK Pyongyang watchers and senior-level defectors.

Kim Kyong-hui's formal power was revealed at the Fourth Party Conference. She was elevated within the Central Committee apparatus from department director to KWP Secretary for Light Industry. She is also a full member of the Politburo, a post she received at the Third Party Conference. Her position within the formal leadership ranking moved from 14th to 6th. It has been rumored that Kim Kyong-hui is the director of the powerful KWP Organization Guidance Department.⁸¹ To date, there is no evidence to support this view except that Kim Jong-il may have believed that only his sister had the experience and relationships necessary to execute the vital missions of ensuring Kim family rule invested in this Party body.⁸² Behind the scenes, according to South Korean sources, she engineered the promotions of several other Party, military, and government leaders to key positions within the leadership ranks. These leaders include Choe Ryong-hae, Kim Won-hong, Pak Pong-ju, and Kwak Pom-gi.⁸³

- **Jang Song-taek (67)** is, for all intents and purposes, the number two leader within the regime next to Kim Jong-un.⁸⁴ There is a

⁸¹ Of course, if the factionalism theory discussed above is true, it is highly unlikely that Kim occupies the directorship of this powerful organization. See "The Rise of Moderate and Hardline Factions in North Korea," *op cit*.

⁸² In terms of the succession, placing Kim Kyong-hui as the head of the OGD would make sense. From this post, she would be better equipped to engineer the turnover throughout the leadership that would need to take place to guarantee that Kim Jong-un could establish his legitimacy and rule effectively. Giving this position to Kim Jong-un with his inexperience in the finer points of how the regime operates could have undermined the succession process. Eventually, however, he will have to take this post (if he has not already) in order to consolidate his power.

⁸³ Author's discussions in Seoul in April 2013.

⁸⁴ In formal rankings, Kim Yong-nam, the President of the SPA Presidium holds this position. But in terms of power and authority, Jang Song-taek eclipses Kim. In 2012, a special meeting of the Politburo created the State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Committee (SPCSGC) and appointed Jang as the chairman (KCBS, 04 November 2012). This organization cemented Jang's status as the second in command. Most of the senior leadership is included in the SPCSGC. Although in principle,

growing consensus within the South Korean Pyongyang watching community that he serves the role of “Control Tower.”⁸⁵ He reportedly sees most, if not all, of the reports and message traffic earmarked for Kim Jong-un. He is allowed to prioritize this paperwork, but cannot alter it in any way. He interacts with the various issue task groups to work through options and reach a consensus for Kim’s final decision. In this regard, he works closely with Kim’s Personal Secretariat. Jang maintains control over the portfolios for the economy and internal security. He also has input on foreign policy, especially as it relates to China, as well as inter-Korean relations. Given his apparent meetings with two private U.S. delegations to Pyongyang in 2012,⁸⁶ he may also have influence on North Korean relations with the United States, although this is likely the purview of Kang Sok-ju, the longtime foreign policy advisor to the Kim family.

the goal of founding the SPCSGC lies in "holding and guiding the general work of the physical culture and sports of the country in a unified manner," Jang Song-taek will be able to virtually take charge of the affairs of the Party’s Secretariat through the SPCSGC if a situation occurs in which either Kim Jong-un or Kim Kyong-hui is not able to carry out their duties.

The South Korean press has speculated on Jang Song-taek’s current standing within the leadership given his reduction in public appearances in 2013 vice 2012. The reason for Jang’s public profile could be attached to Kim Jong-un’s need to be seen as the leader, as well as Jang’s likely heavy workload. Jang continues to make appearances at high-level events such as the opening ceremony for the Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs’ Cemetery in Pyongyang on July 25, where he stood two spots to Kim Jong-un’s right (next to Choe Ryong-hae). See KCTV film footage of the event, 25 July 2013.

⁸⁵ In North Korean lexicon, the “Control Tower” is the locus for day-to-day administration of the regime. When he was still alive, there was no question that Kim Jong-il was the “Control Tower.”

⁸⁶ “Secret U.S.-North Korea diplomatic trips reported,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 2013.



Jang Song-taek and Kim Jong-un at the April 2013 U'nhasu Concert to Mark Sun's Day. (Source: Korean Central Television)

At the Fourth Party Conference, Jang Song-taek was elevated from alternate member to full member of the Politburo. He is also a vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, as well as the director of the KWP Administrative Department, which oversees the organizations responsible for internal security. He reportedly oversees one of the largest and most diverse patronage systems within the North Korean leadership.

- **VMAR Choe Ryong-hae (63)** is the junior member of the regents surrounding Kim Jong-un.⁸⁷ His role is to ensure the loyalty

⁸⁷ In a system where blood lines and familial heritage are taken very seriously, Choe Ryong-hae's high status stems from his belonging to the anti-Japanese partisan revolutionary line, which is only superseded in importance by the "Mt. Paekdu line" of the Kim family itself. Therefore, in order to understand Choe's status in the North Korean regime, one must look to the relationship between the Choe and Kim families. Choe's family has a long-time relationship with the Kim dynasty. Choe's father, Choe Hyun, who died in 1982, was a friend of North Korean founder Kim Il-sung during the early years of anti-Japanese guerrilla movement. He later served as North Korea's defense minister. Choe Hyun's family is known as a "family of loyalty" in the North. For a de-

alty of the military. More than that of any other figure, Choe's status was catapulted at the Fourth Party Conference—moving up in the formal leadership rankings from 18th to 4th. Already an alternate member of the Politburo (since the 2010 Third Party Conference) and KWP Secretary for Military Affairs, Choe was elevated to the Politburo Presidium. He also became a vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. Not a professional soldier, Choe is a vice marshal and director of the General Political Bureau,⁸⁸ the Party's surveillance organ within the armed forces.⁸⁹ Choe apparently has a direct channel to Kim Jong-un—his reports are not subject to vetting by Jang Song-taek. While the relationship between Choe and Jang is not clear,⁹⁰ the potential exists for Kim Jong-un (with Kim Kyong-hui's assistance) to play the two off against each other in

tailed overview of the Choe family, see "The Importance of Choi Ryong Hae," *The Daily NK*, 19 August 2013.

⁸⁸ Choe effectively has become the regime's top military authority after Kim Jong-un.

⁸⁹ According to the factionalism theory discussed above, the KWP Organization Guidance Department and military high command allowed Choe's appointment to go forward out of respect for Kim Jong-il's wishes and the strong relationship that once existed between Kim Il-sung and Choe's father, the former Minister of Defense. His appointment also took place during the period when the so-called moderate faction was in ascendance within the regime.

⁹⁰ The relationship between Choe Ryong-hae and Jang Song-taek is the subject of much debate within the South Korean Pyongyang-watching community. Some believe that the close ties between the two in their days in the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League created a bond that continues to exist. They point to the fact that Choe was demoted from his position close to the same time that Jang Song-taek disappeared from public view around 2004 and was resurrected upon Jang's return to prominence. Others believe that Choe's ties are closer to Kim Kyong-hui than to Jang Song-taek and that Kim uses Choe to keep her erstwhile husband in check. They argue that Jang has used his ties with the high command to undermine Choe and keep him politically off balance. Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013. See also "Defector Claims Jang-Choe in Military Battle," *The Daily NK*, 05 July 2013.

order to create space within the inner core of the regime to grow his own power and influence.⁹¹



Choe Ryong-hae receiving a gift from Kim Jong-un at the enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission of the Workers Party of Korea in February 2013. (Source: Korean Central Television)

The gatekeeping apparatus

One of the most sensitive topics regarding the North Korean leadership is the Supreme Leader's Personal Secretariat. It is here where daily reports are processed, agendas of leadership meetings are worked out, and decisions from the Leader are issued. Its collection of aides and advisors are critical to providing the Leader with situational awareness on the regime and how it is functioning. That said, very little, if anything is actually known about this institution. Under

⁹¹ Some Pyongyang watchers argue that there is evidence of this battle. Choe accompanied Kim Jong-un on his site visits more than any other official in the first half of 2013. During that period, he appeared at 72 out of 95 such public appearances. Conversely, Jang, who appeared the most in 2012, appeared only 25 times in the first half of 2013. See "Defector Claims Jang-Choe in Military Battle," *op cit*. Other Pyongyang watchers assert that Jang's lower public profile is tied to his running of the regime's day-to-day operations and the fact that he has secured his position as the second in command behind Kim Jong-un.

Kim Jong-il, the role and function of the Personal Secretariat, and even some of its members, came to light through defector reporting and a few books published by very senior members of the leadership who made their way to South Korea. When Kim died, theories emerged as to the fate of this institution. Some believe that it rolled over to his successor, Kim Jong-un. Others believe that the new leader may have leaned on his father's apparatus in the first few months of his reign but has slowly created his own, much smaller, Personal Secretariat that answers only to him. As one well-informed South Korean Pyongyang watcher noted,

Anyone who says they know anything about Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat will probably be proven wrong. This subject is too sensitive and no information about it is known for sure—just rumors and speculation.⁹²

Readers must keep that caution in mind while reading the following description of the role and function of the Personal Secretariat. It is based on information that came out during the Kim Jong-il period and augmented with the latest rumors emerging via defector networks in Seoul about its existence today under Kim Jong-un.

The role of the Personal Secretariat under Kim Jong-il

At the center of Kim Jong-il's hub-and-spoke system was his Personal Secretariat, which was located in the KWP Number 1 building in the Chung District of Pyongyang.⁹³ The KWP's Secretarial Office was established in the early 1970s to assist Kim Jong-il as he prepared his father's succession.⁹⁴ In the early 1980s, after Kim was nominated as a

⁹² Author's interview in Seoul, April 2013.

⁹³ KWP No. 1 office building originally served as Kim Il-sung's primary Party office. In 1976, Kim Il-sung moved into the presidential palace built in Pyongyang's Hyongjesan District and Kim Jong-il took up residence in the Party headquarters. Ri Yong-guk, *Nanun Kim Jong-il Kyonghowoniotta* [I Was Kim Jong-il's Former Bodyguard] (Seoul: Sidae Chongsin, 2002). Ri Yong-guk, prior to his defection in 1999, was reportedly a member of Kim Jong-il's bodyguard unit.

⁹⁴ Because the office was created when Kim was working as the KWP Secretary for Organizational Affairs, it also became known as the Secretarial Office of the Organization Guidance Department.

Presidium member of the Politburo, the structure and mission of the Secretarial Office were extended. The office had several sections, which oversaw various parts of the leadership apparatus, including the Central Committee departments, the NDC, the military, the Cabinet, the State Security Department, and the Supreme People's Assembly. The position titles of officials in the Secretarial Office were the same as those for the Central Committee—director, first vice director, vice director, section chief, deputy section chief, and inspector. The director of the Personal Secretariat, Kang Sang-chun, was a university classmate of Kim's, and the vice director, Kim Chung-il, was a confidant of the Kim family.⁹⁵ In his last years, Kim Jong-il's mistress and technical secretary, Kim Ok, was rumored to be a major player inside his Personal Secretariat.⁹⁶



A young Kim Jong-il at his desk (Source: Osamu Eya, *Great Illustrated Book of Kim Chong-il* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1994).

The source of much speculation by North Korea watchers, Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat was where the formal and informal systems of power came together. Wielding influence by virtue of its "gate keep-

⁹⁵ Author's discussions in Seoul, November 2012.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

ing” function, this office was often compared to the royal order system that operated during the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910). Kim Jong-il’s Personal Secretariat apparently had no official sanction and was never mentioned in the North Korean media. It received, classified, and facilitated documents addressed to the chairman (Kim Jong-il) and then issued instructions.⁹⁷ It also administered Kim’s schedule, itineraries, protocol, and logistics supply, and liaised with the Guards Command to ensure his security. Because the Kim Jong-il Secretariat was not an official organization, its senior cadre worked externally as members of the KWP Organization Guidance Department.⁹⁸

Closely associated with Kim Jong-il’s Personal Secretariat (and even overlapping at times) was an entity known as the “Third Floor.”⁹⁹ This element of Kim Jong-il’s personal staff assisted him in conducting numerous “special” operations, both inside and outside the country. The members of the “Third Floor” cadre normally had long political lives. Paek In-su (former head of Office No. 39) worked for the apparatus for 28 years, and Kwon Yong-nok and Ri Chol did so for more than 20 years. While it would have been difficult to replace them, as they were in charge of secret affairs, their long hold on their positions was also not unrelated to Kim Jong-il’s personality. These behind-the-scene members of the leadership were critical to the maintenance of the regime.

These “special” operations marked a significant departure from the role of the Personal Secretariat as it existed under Kim Il-sung. For example, the concept of a slush fund, which was managed by Kim Jong-il’s staff, did not exist before he took power. Instead, Kim Il-sung’s needs were paid for by “presidential bonds,” which were creat-

⁹⁷ “Kim Jong-il Secretariat, at the Center of Power although not Listed as an Official Organization,” *Chosun Ilbo*, 15 April 2001. For a detailed discussion of Kim’s Personal Secretariat including a list of presumed personnel, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Jong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The name comes from the location of this office, which was on the third floor of Office Complex Number 1, where Kim Jong-il’s offices were located.

ed by laying in 3 percent of the budget. They were akin to the resources reserved in preparation for war.¹⁰⁰ These secret funds were Kim Jong-il's personal money for him to buy whatever he thought necessary, including daily necessities from foreign countries or presents for his subordinates. In terms of system dynamics, many contend that the operation of this nefarious activity by a key component of the regime undermined Kim Jong-il's legitimacy.

Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat

As noted above, before Kim Jong-il died, he took great measures to resurrect the Party apparatus in order to create a formal leadership environment for his son's rule. The Party gives legitimacy to Kim Jong-un's status as Supreme Leader. It also provides formal mechanisms through which Kim can steer and execute policy. What Kim Jong-il allegedly left to his son to accomplish was the construction of his own Personal Secretariat. Because of the sensitive nature of this institution, the Leader must be directly responsible for choosing its members. Loyalty and long-standing relationships are critical to its mode of operation.

According to some Pyongyang watchers and senior-level defectors, Kim Jong-un began to construct his Personal Secretariat soon after he became heir apparent in 2009.¹⁰¹ For the next few years, his apparatus was closely tied to his father's Personal Secretariat.¹⁰² This makes sense because Kim Jong-un would increasingly be given access to the reports coming and going from Kim Jong-il's office. After Kim Jong-un became the official heir apparent in the wake of the Third Party Conference in 2010, he was given more situational awareness and allowed to receive reports as they made their way to his father. Some Pyongyang watchers have speculated that Kim Jong-un not only received these reports, but was allowed to make comments as they were processed so that his father would understand his point of view on

¹⁰⁰ U Chong-chang, "ROK Monthly on DPRK Kim Jong-il's Slush Fund Deposits in Swiss Banks," *Seoul Wolgan Chosun*, 01 November 2000.

¹⁰¹ Author's discussions with senior-level defectors in Seoul in 2009 and 2010.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

matters of state.¹⁰³ Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat would most likely have played an important role in assisting the heir apparent in understanding the reports and putting them in context.¹⁰⁴

Sometime shortly before or after Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat began to separate from his father's apparatus. Descriptions of this new Personal Secretariat are quite different from ones of his father's secretariat. While Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat has been described as huge, numbering nearly 300 members at one point, Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat has recently been described as more intimate, numbering fewer than 50 core members.¹⁰⁵ Its role, function, and manner of operation, however, appear to be similar to those of Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat. It receives, classifies, and facilitates documents addressed to Kim Jong-un and then issues instructions. It also administers Kim's schedule, itineraries, protocol and logistics supply, and presumably liaisons with the Guards Command to ensure his security. One major difference, however, is that it also has ties to the regents (especially Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek) in terms of coordinating meetings and processing incoming reports.¹⁰⁶ This would not be surprising because ever since Kim Jong-il's stroke in 2008,¹⁰⁷ the Kim family clan

¹⁰³ There is some debate among Pyongyang watchers in Seoul over what types of reports Kim Jong-un was allowed to see. Some contend that his access did not extend to reports pertaining to the military or foreign affairs. Access to these reports came later.

¹⁰⁴ This picture of how Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat functioned early on stands in stark contrast to defector reports of how Kim Jong-il used his Personal Secretariat. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kim Jong-il's apparatus was reportedly bugging Kim Il-sung's offices and determining which reports the *Suryong* would see. In this way, Kim Jong-il was increasingly responsible for running the regime while limiting Kim Il-sung's situational awareness. Author's interviews with numerous senior North Korean defectors in Seoul from 2002 to 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Author's interview with a defector who has ties back into the regime, April 2013.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Following Kim Jong-il's stroke, his personal apparatus reportedly became bifurcated. The part that handled his daily affairs and perpetuated his decision-making shrank. Kim Ok, Kim Kyong-hui, and Jang Song-taek

has formed the first line of defense around Kim Jong-un. His Personal Secretariat, therefore, would presumably be closely tied to the Kim family.¹⁰⁸

If this speculation is accurate, it fits well with the latest information coming out of the defector networks in Seoul regarding Kim's Personal Secretariat. According to several sources, Kim Sol-song, Kim Jong-un's half-sister, heads up his Personal Secretariat.¹⁰⁹ By many accounts, Kim Sol-song was Kim Jong-il's favorite child. She was the first of two daughters born to Kim Jong-il and his second wife, Kim Yong-suk, and the only grandchild apparently recognized by Kim Il-sung. Kim Jong-il mentioned Kim Sol-song in his last will and testament, noting that she "should be supported as a caretaker of Jong-un."¹¹⁰

Kim Sol-song (39) has extensive experience working inside the Party and state apparatus. She was born in 1974, and, when in her teens, began work in Kim Il-sung's Presidential Office. She moved over to the KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department, where she worked closely with one of her father's closest associates, Kim Ki-nam. In the late 1990s, she moved into her father's Personal Secretariat, taking up the portfolio as a department head and chief of Office 99,¹¹¹ which

were critical to ensuring the continuation of governance. After Kim Jong-il died, it makes sense that Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek, his two principal regents, would maintain ties to Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat.

¹⁰⁸ According to one long-time North Korean leadership watcher, Jeon Hee-jeong, the husband of Jang Song-ae (Jang Song-taek's sister) and the father of Jang Song-taek's son-in-law (Jeon Yong-jin), is a foreign policy advisor in Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat. Jeon was an advisor to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and is the director of the NDC's Foreign Affairs Department. Nicolas Levi, "A Big Day for the Elite Clans," *Daily NK*, 10 April 2012.

¹⁰⁹ According to one defector, Kim Sol-song is not the first director of Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat. There have been several directors as the institution has evolved. Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

¹¹⁰ "Before His Death, Kim Jong Il Wrote Instructions," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 14 April 2012.

¹¹¹ Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Jong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

had responsibility for some of the more sensitive financial accounts and acquisition/proliferation of technology.¹¹² In the 2000s, reports began to surface that Kim Sol-song had become one of her father's closest aides. Multilingual, she served as her father's translator on several of his trips, including his 2002 trip to Russia. She also is rumored to be an officer in the General Guard Command and most likely had liaison responsibilities with this body in coordinating her father's security. She allegedly is very close to her aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, as well as Kim Ok,¹¹³ with whom she worked closely in Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat.

Not only is Kim Sol-song a seasoned facilitator and experienced political operative within the North Korean regime, she is rumored to be as calculating as her aunt in the execution of power. Therefore, it makes sense that she would be intimately tied to Kim Jong-un as head of his apparatus. As Kim Kyong-hui's illness weakens her ability to advise and coach her nephew and to support his efforts to consolidate his position within the regime, it is likely that Kim Sol-song will step into this role.

Another family member who may also be tied to Kim's Personal Secretariat is his younger sister, Kim Yo-jong. She has apparently been groomed in the nuances of the country's political affairs by both Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek since at least 2009, when she began working in the Party Central Committee. She also has close ties with Kim Ok, Kim Jong-il's technical secretary and last "wife." Her central

¹¹² "North Korea Creates New Front Company to Supply Iran With Nuclear Technology," *Moscow Times Online*, 27 April 2010. See also "DPRK's Office 99 Said to Have Played Central Role in Syrian Nuclear Project," *NHK General Television*, 25 April 2008. In more recent reports, she was identified as a high-level bureaucrat in the KWP Machine Industry (Munitions) Department. Levi, "A Big Day for the Elite Clans," op. cit.

¹¹³ According to recent South Korean reporting, Kim Ok and her father Kim Hyo, a deputy director of KWP Finance and Accounting Department, have been dismissed from all their posts. It is not clear whether this was a purge or is tied to their health. Kim Hyo is in his 90s and his daughter allegedly tried to commit suicide following Kim Jong-il's death. Kim Ok appeared at various leadership events during the mourning period and then disappeared from public view. "Kim Jong-il's Widow 'Purged'," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 03 July 2013.

role in the regime was hinted at during the funeral ceremonies for her father. Kim Yo-jong assumed a role similar to the one that her aunt (Kim Kyong-hui) played during Kim Il-sung's funeral ceremonies in 1994. She stood behind her brother as Kim Jong-un received foreign dignitaries. She lined up with members of the leadership when they paid their respects at Kim Jong-il's casket, and led core members of the North Korean leadership to the bier for viewing. Recent reporting has placed her either in the NDC apparatus or within the KWP Organization Guidance Department.¹¹⁴ She has also been identified as a protocol secretary for Kim Jong-un and the person responsible for handling his travel. If this is true, she also probably holds a position within his Personal Secretariat. According to one North Korean source, she is responsible for organizing his attendance at ceremonies ("It's widely whispered in the Party that you have to get on Kim Yo-jong's good side if you want to invite Kim Jong-un to your ceremony").¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ See "KJI Youngest Daughter Working as Events Manager for KJU?" *North Korea Leadership Watch*, 22 July 2013 and "Kim Jong-un's Sister Given Key Party Post," *Chosun Ilbo*, 22 July 2013.

¹¹⁵ North Korean official interview with Radio Free Asia, as quoted in "Kim Jong-un's Sister Given Key Party Post," *op. cit.*

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Kim Jong-un's interactions with the wider North Korean leadership

The picture that is emerging of the regime structure in the early years of Kim Jong-un's reign is one in which the Supreme Leader operates in a highly structured bubble surrounded by gatekeepers. His interactions outside of this bubble are somewhat managed (via guidance inspections, for example), but he has the ability to reach out to the wider North Korean leadership in order to access reservoirs of information and advice, and to build relationships for the future.

Two levels of the North Korean leadership, beyond the regents' level, are critical to making the regime operate: the second and third echelons.¹¹⁶ These levels include much of the senior leadership across the Party, military, and government, as well as the commanders, ministers, and directors, who are responsible for executing policy. Most of these individuals are tied to the Kim family via blood and family relations. Kim Jong-il's hub-and-spoke leadership style was based on clear lines of communication to these second and third echelons, often jumping the chain of command to ensure that orders were understood and carried out. It is not yet clear whether Kim Jong-un will run the regime in the same way that his father did, but relationships at these levels will be critical as he develops the relationships that will allow him to eventually consolidate his power. A fourth level of leadership, while still highly speculative, is worth watching since it may contain the leaders of the future.

Key individuals in the second echelon of the leadership

The second echelon includes those officials who hold critical portfolios within the leadership and are responsible for relevant policy are-

¹¹⁶ There is much debate within Pyongyang watching circles on which leaders should be included in which echelons. The binning done later in this chapter represents the author's opinion based on discussions with numerous Pyongyang watchers over the years.

as or have control over critical resources and patronage systems. These officials can provide advice and intelligence, but have no decision-making authority. They have also cultivated a close relationship with Kim Jong-un since 2010, when he became the heir apparent. Some within this echelon may, on occasion, be able to reach out directly to him, bypassing his gatekeepers.¹¹⁷ Over the next few years, as Kim Jong-un consolidates his position, many of these leaders will likely disappear from this echelon.¹¹⁸ But as of now, this echelon of the senior leadership includes the following.

Party

- **Kim Ki-nam (84)** is the KWP Secretary for Propaganda. He is also a full member of the Politburo (since 2010) and director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department. A close associate of the Kim family, Kim Ki-nam is credited with having created the cult of personality around Kim Jong-il and praising Kim Il-sung's historic role as the founder of the regime. His ties to the Kim family go back to the 1930s and 1940s, when his father was a member of Kim Il-sung's partisan movement. Kim later attended Mangyongdae Revolutionary Academy, where he met Kim Jong-il. Early in his career, Kim Ki-nam served as a Russian translator for Kim Il-sung. He later cultivated a close relationship with Kim Jong-il and was a frequent member of Kim's late night parties where major policy decisions were made.¹¹⁹ He

¹¹⁷ This ability to bypass the gatekeeping apparatus is likely tied to a person's relationship with Kim Jong-un. Blood relatives of the Kim family and close associates of Kim Jong-il may have a certain amount of access that is denied to others.

¹¹⁸ Some Pyongyang watchers caution against the belief that the old guard is being moved aside. Many still continue to play important roles within the regime despite their age and health. See Nicolas Levi, "Analysis: Old Generation of North Korean Elite Remain Active," *New Focus International*, 31 July 2013.

¹¹⁹ Kim Jong-il and Kim Ki-nam's relationship goes back to the 1960s when the two allegedly conspired to weaken the Kang Song-ae faction within the Kim family and position Kim Jong-il to become heir apparent, which he did in 1974. Kim Ki-nam was rumored to be one of the authors of the strategy to "cut the side branches," a phrase linked to the purge within the Kim family that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

has had a leading role in the approval or authorship of essays, slogans, and other media in support of the hereditary succession. He was given a role in ensuring Kim Jong-un's succession drive and appointed to the Politburo in September 2010. He was one of the only three civilian officials who accompanied Kim Jong-il's coffin during the funeral in December 2011. Not only was he very close to Kim Jong-il and active in close aide politics, he allegedly has close ties to both Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek.

- **Choe Thae-bok (83)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2010), a KWP secretary, and the chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly (since 1998). As one of the first graduates of Mangyongdae Revolutionary Academy, he most likely had ties with Kim Jong-il from an early age. He later became one of Kim's closest aides and advisors on international issues. Along with Kim Jong-un and Kim Ki-nam, he was the only other civilian to accompany Kim Jong-il's hearse. Choe is a reputed protégé of Yang Hyong-sop (SPA Presidium Vice President) and is tied to Kim Kyong-hui's patronage system.¹²⁰
- **Pak To-chun (69)** is a full member of the Politburo (since 2010), the KWP Secretary for Defense Industry, and a member of the NDC (since 2011). His career began to rise when he took over the sensitive post of Party secretary of Chagang province, which is home to many parts of the defense industrial complex. In terms of leadership politics, Pak is tied more closely to Kim Jong-un than he was to Kim Jong-il. He was part of the so-called "national security committee" that met at the end of January (2013). In the photograph that appeared in the North Korean media, Pak was seated to Kim Jong-un's immediate right. Given the role that testing of critical defense systems, such as the nuclear and missile programs, have played in the early part of Kim Jong-un's reign, it is highly likely that Pak To-chun has regular access to Kim. It should be noted, however, that as of this writing, Pak has just resurfaced after being out of

¹²⁰ *North Korean Leadership Watch.*

the public eye for three months, which led to speculation about his physical and political health.¹²¹

- **Ju Kyu-chang (73)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010), a member of the NDC (since 2009), and the director of the KWP Machine Industry (Defense Industry) Department. His ties to senior leadership go back to the early 2000s, when he began accompanying Kim Jong-il on guidance inspections. Because of his responsibility for day-to-day oversight of the development of the regime's critical defense systems, he is probably one of the few director-level officials who has regular access to Kim Jong-un. It is interesting to note that in the January photograph of Kim Jong-un interacting with his so-called "national security team," Ju Kyu-chang was not present and his role in the meeting was handled by his deputy, Hong Sung-mu. Ju returned to the public eye with the third nuclear test in February 2013.

¹²¹ Pak To-chun is the fourth ranking among nine KWP secretaries and, as such, should attend important leadership events. Pak was last seen on May 1 (2013) at a sporting event for working people in the health sector. He missed several high profile events in July, which were tied to the 60th anniversary of the end of the Korean War. Most notably, he missed the parade in Kim Il-sung Square, which was attended by the eight other Party secretaries. He also missed the leadership visit to Kumsusan Palace of the Sun on July 8, the anniversary of Kim Il-sung's death. The rumors surrounding his lack of visibility ranged from health issues to being purged for personal corruption. One U.S. scholar suggested that he might have been punished for the aborted Musudan test in April. North Korea was widely expected to test-launch one or two medium-range missiles from a mobile launch pad along the east coast, but after a rumored malfunction, the test was scrubbed. See "Attention Drawn to Background of 'Disappearance' of Pak To-chun, Secretary in Charge of the North's Munitions," *Yonhap Online*, 03 August 2013; "Top NK Official Might Have Been Punished for Problem in Missile Program: U.S. Scholar," *Yonhap*, 05 August 2013. In September, however, Pak To-chun attended the Worker-Peasant Red Guard parade held in Pyongyang on 9 September to mark the 65th anniversary of the country's foundation. During the parade Pak stood on the parade review platform with other VIPs, standing between KWP Secretary Choe Tae-bok and Honorary Supreme People's Assembly Presidium Vice President Choe Yong-nim.

- **Kim Kyong-ok** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010) and a first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department. He began to appear in the North Korean media in the months after Kim Jong-il's stroke, and his rise has been tied to that of Kim Jong-un. His name appeared on the 28 September 2010 promotion list (full general) along with Kim Jong-un, Kim Kyong-hui, and Choe Ryong-hae. In July 2011, Kim was part of a small entourage that accompanied Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un on a field inspection of KPA Unit #963 (headquarters of the Guard Command), which provides close protection, security, and logistical services for the Kim family and the central leadership.¹²² This is an indication that Kim Kyong-ok has ties to internal security within the regime. He is also rumored to hold the portfolio within the OGD for military and security affairs.
- **Jo Yon-jun (75)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2012) and first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department. Jo's career within the Party apparatus has been spent in the powerful OGD, where he handles political and economic issues. Not much is known about Jo's relationship with Kim Jong-un or the senior leadership. His position within the OGD suggests that he would have some access to Kim Jong-un, but this may come through one of the regents, such as Kim Kyong-hui.

Military

- **Gen. O Kuk-ryol (82)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (2012) and vice chairman of the NDC (2009). O's ties to the Kim family go back to the 1930s. He is the nephew of North Korean hero O Jung-hup and son of O Jum-song, a partisan supporter of Kim Il-sung. After the war, O was one of the war orphans looked after by Kim Il-sung and his first wife (and Kim Jong-il's mother), Kim Jong-suk. Ever since, the O family has been considered one of the three major families of the North Korean elite and one that the Kim family leans on to ensure that the high command remains loyal to the concept of the

¹²² Ibid.

Suryong system. For this reason, it is not surprising that O Kuk-ryol returned to prominence in the months after Kim Jong-il's stroke and throughout the succession process for Kim Jong-un. He was featured in the funeral ceremonies for Kim Jong-il and has continued to appear at major leadership events. A former chief of the General Staff and director of the KWP Operations Department,¹²³ O sits atop one of the most prominent patronage systems inside the North Korean armed forces. He reportedly has responsibility within the NDC for intelligence operations abroad as well as for crisis management. In periods of tension on the Korean Peninsula, such as that in March/April 2013, O's influence and access to Kim Jong-un and his advisors may increase. It should be noted, however, that many Pyongyang watchers believe that O Kuk-ryol's influence has waned and that he may be on the verge of retirement. Others argue that his role will continue to be important, albeit behind the scenes and in the shadows, as Kim Jong-un consolidates his power.¹²⁴

- **VMAR Ri Yong-mu (88)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2010) and a vice chairman of the NDC (since 1998). One of the elderly elite (born in 1925), Ri is related to the Kim family via Kim Jong-il's great grandmother, Ri Po-ik.¹²⁵ He is a cousin to Kim Jong-un. Like O Kuk-ryol, Ri Yong-su oversees one of the major patronage systems inside the military. He fell out of favor with the Kim family in the late 1970s (he was dismissed as director of the General Political Bureau because of his relationships with elements within the Kim family that were opposed to Kim Jong-il), but his career was resurrected in the late 1980s. He was a confidant to Kim Jong-il and probably serves as a stabilizing force during the transition. His access to Kim Jong-un is unclear and most likely not on a regular basis outside of

¹²³ Prior to 2009, the KWP Operations Department had responsibility for much of North Korea's special operations forces. In 2009, this department was dissolved and its capabilities folded into the newly established Reconnaissance General Bureau.

¹²⁴ Author's interviews in Seoul in 2012 and 2013.

¹²⁵ He is also the husband of Kim Jong-sun, Kim Il-sung's cousin.

formal channels. It is also rumored that Ri suffers from cancer and, therefore, is limited in his ability to conduct politics.

- **Gen. Kim Kyok-sik (75)** is an alternate member of the Politburo and a member of the National Defense Commission (since 2013). In May 2013, he was replaced as minister of People's Armed Forces and appointed as chief of the General Staff. In August, after serving in this post for three months, Kim was apparently replaced by Ri Yong-gil. His current post is unknown, but may be that of a military advisor to Kim Jong-un. The May two-step move seems to have been designed to return Kim to a position where he could not only exert greater control over the operational forces, but could also ensure that Kim Jong-un's equities are respected throughout the high command and at the lower echelons of the officer corps. He is rumored to have close ties to Kim Jong-un and has served in his Personal Secretariat as a military advisor.¹²⁶ He also oversees one of the key patronage systems inside the military, especially below the high command level, among core and division commanders. Now that Kim Jong-un's ties with the high command appear to have stabilized, Kim Kyok-sik has apparently returned to the informal network of power. His advice to Kim Jong-un likely comes through direct and informal channels—possibly as a member of the Personal Secretariat.
- **Gen. Ri Yong-gil (60s)** is apparently the chief of the General Staff (since August 2013). His rise has been meteoric. He is a former commander of the Third and Fifth corps and a member of the third generation of military officers. At the end of March 2013, he was identified as the director of the GSD Operations Bureau during a briefing for Kim Jong-un as part of an emergency operations meeting related to the KPA Strategic Rocket Force's "firepower strike plan."¹²⁷ In May, he accompa-

¹²⁶ Kim Kyok-sik's ties to Kim Jong-un's family goes back to the 1950s when he was a classmate of Kim Jong-il at Namsan Higher Middle School. According to some defector sources, Kim Kyok-sik and Kim Jong-il formed a close friendship that continued into adulthood.

¹²⁷ "Kim Jong Un Holds Operations Meeting 29 Mar, Ratifies Plan for Firepower Strike," KCBS, 28 March 2013.

nied VMAR Choe Ryong-hae to China as part of a high-profile visit to examine the relationship in the aftermath of the two month crisis on the Korean Peninsula. During the Kim Jong-il era, the director of the GSD Operations Bureau had a direct channel to the Supreme Leader, bypassing the chief of the General Staff. Following Ri's appointment to this post, some believed that as Kim Jong-un's understanding of military affairs increased, this informal channel might be reestablished since this post is one of the few within the high command that has situational awareness of operations across the armed forces. Ri's promotion to chief of the General Staff has likely negated the need for informal channels as Ri now has a direct and formal channel in which to provide military advice to the Supreme Leader. It will, however, be important for Pyongyang watchers to focus on who will replace Ri as director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau, which will continue to play an important role in high command affairs.

- **Gen. Jang Jong-nam (50s)** is the Minister of People's Armed Forces (since 2013). Like Ri Yong-gil, Jang Jong-nam's rise through the high command has been very rapid. As recently as December 2012, he was identified as the commander of the First Corps Commander, which is responsible for the north-eastern front of the inter-Korean border. He has also been promoted twice within a year, going from two stars to four stars with his second (unannounced) promotion in August. After being appointed to his current post, Jang has become a frequent cohort on Kim Jong-un's guidance inspections. His access to Kim likely comes through formal channels in his role as minister of People's Armed Forces.
- **VMAR Kim Yong-chun (77)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2010), a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010), and a vice chairman of the NDC (since 2007). His ties to the Kim family go back to the 1980s when he was director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau.¹²⁸ In 1995, he played a

¹²⁸ Kim Yong-chun and O Kuk-ryol were purged in the mid-1980s following a dispute with O Jin-u. However, they were part of a clique within the General Staff who enjoyed Kim Jong-il's patronage and it was his support that saved them and brought them back to power after O Jin-u's death.

key role in preventing an attempted coup d'état by the Sixth Corps, thus cementing his credentials as a loyal supporter of the Kim family. He was one of the members who escorted Kim Jong-il's hearse. Even though he lost his portfolio as minister of People's Armed Forces in 2012, he holds a critical post within the Party apparatus as the director of the KWP Civil Defense Department. His access to Kim Jong-un is most likely occasional. He has close ties to Jang Song-taek and probably works closely with him on matters related to building Kim Jong-un's legitimacy within the high command.¹²⁹

- **VMAR Hyon Chol-hae (79)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2012) and Central Military Commission (since 2012). Hyon was a long-time confidant of Kim Jong-il from their time at Mangyongdae Revolutionary Academy. Hyon's father fought alongside Kim Il-sung against the Japanese, and Hyon himself served as a bodyguard to Kim Il-sung during the Korean War. Hyon Chol-hae played a role during the Kim Jong-il era as an interpreter of military thinking.¹³⁰ He was used by Kim to liaise with the more conservative elements of the high command in order to secure their support for shifts in policy.¹³¹ It is likely that since his replacement as the first vice minister of People's Armed Forces (May 2013), he has continued to act in this regard behind the scenes. Since his status has continued to rise under Kim Jong-un, it is unlikely that he has been purged;¹³² he has probably only moved aside as part of the generational turnover. His access to Kim Jong-un would most likely go

¹²⁹ There is a range of opinion about Kim Yong-chun's relationships within the high command. While some believe that he has some influence, many believe that he is despised because of his questionable operational credentials. He most likely does not oversee an extensive patronage system.

¹³⁰ Author's discussions with a senior defector who has a deep knowledge of Hyon Chol-hae, November 2012.

¹³¹ Author's discussions in Seoul, April 2013.

¹³² On 8 July (2013), he accompanied Kim Jong-un and other members of the North Korean leadership to Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in commemoration of the 19th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's death.

through Jang Song-taek, with whom Hyon allegedly formed a close relationship when he was director of policy for the NDC.

- **Gen. Kim Yong-chol (67)** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010), vice chief of the General Staff (since 2013),¹³³ and director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (since 2009). His ties to Kim Jong-un allegedly go back to the early 2000s, when he oversaw Kim's education at Kim Il-sung Military University. Before that, he was in the Guard Command and served as a bodyguard to Kim Jong-il. The RGB was tied to the succession in 2010 with the sinking of *Cheonan*. While there has been speculation over the relationship between Kim Yong-chol and Kim Jong-un in recent years, given the former's demotion and re-promotion, he was a lead voice during the tensions of March/April 2013. In early March, he announced North Korea's abrogation of the armistice. He is also one of the four military officers in the photograph of Kim Jong-un's military briefing on March 29, 2013. Formally, his access to the senior leadership would go through Ri Yong-gil (in his apparent capacity as chief of the General Staff) and O Kuk-ryol (as vice chairman of the NDC). However, Kim Yong-chol's long-time relationship with Kim Jong-un likely provides him with a private channel of communication, especially on issues related to South Korea and in times of crisis.
- **Gen. Yun Jong-rin** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010). As director of the General Guard Command,¹³⁴ he has responsibility for ensuring Kim Jong-un's protection. Therefore, he not only works with Kim's Personal Secretariat, but most likely has a direct line of communication

¹³³ According to the Ministry of Unification's *Who's Who in Major North Korean Agencies and Organizations in 2013*," the other vice chiefs of the GSD are O Kum-chol, Kim Su-hak, Kim Myong-hwan, and Ro Kwang-chol. O Kum-chol (former commander of the KPA Air Force) and his brother, O Chol-san (member of the KPA Navy's political committee), are sons of O Paek-ryong, former director of the General Escort Bureau and head of the KWP Military Department.

¹³⁴ He has held this post since 2003, which suggests his close ties to the Kim family. The fact that he was not replaced when Kim Jong-un took power suggests a close relationship between the two.

to Kim Jong-un that bypasses any gatekeepers. Yun was a protégé of Jang Song-taek's older brother, Jang Song-u. Some South Korean media have suggested that Yun reports directly to Jang Song-taek, but this is unlikely given the sensitive responsibilities of the Guard Command and its relationship to the Supreme Leader.

- **Gen. Kim Won-hong (67)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2012), the Central Military Commission (since 2010), and the NDC (since 2012). As the director of the State Security Department, Kim formally reports up to Jang Song-taek as the KWP director of Administrative Affairs.¹³⁵ The SSD is also subordinate to the NDC. However, Kim Won-hong most likely has an informal channel to Kim Jong-un on issues of a sensitive nature. Kim's status, more than that of almost any other member of the North Korean leadership, has been tied to Kim Jong-un. He publicly appeared in leadership circles in 2010 and has been a frequent member of Kim Jong-un's guidance inspections—venues in which he would have direct access to the Supreme Leader. He also is rumored to have particularly close ties to Kim Kyong-hui, going back to his days as the director of the Military Security Command and, earlier, in the General Political Bureau.
- **Gen. Choe Pu-il (68)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2013), a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010), and a member of the NDC (since 2013). Although Choe's status has been rising ever since Kim Jong-un became heir apparent, he was catapulted to the senior leadership in 2013. A close associate of the Kim family for years, he is also rumored to be a favorite of Kim Jong-un and was elevated to general [*taejang*] in Special Command Order 0036, signed by the Supreme Commander in June.¹³⁶ As minister of People's

¹³⁵ Ken E. Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State* (Washington, DC: The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012).

¹³⁶ "Korean People's Army Supreme Commander's Order No. 0036," *Nodong Sinmun*, 10 June 2013. In fact, this was a re-promotion. Choe was originally promoted to general alongside Kim Jong-un in September 2010, but was stripped of one rank at some point. His re-elevation appears to now recon-

Security, he reports up to Jang Song-taek and the NDC, but he may also have a direct channel to Kim Jong-un.

- **Col. Gen. Cho Kyong-chol** does not sit on any leadership body. As head of the Military Security Command, he runs an organization that plays an important role in guaranteeing internal security. Like the General Political Bureau, the Military Security Command is responsible for ensuring the loyalty of the armed forces, something it does through surveillance and infiltration. Under Kim Jong-il, the Military Security Command rose in prominence to rival that of the State Security Department and the Ministry of People's Security. It is formally subordinate to the Ministry of People's Armed Forces and NDC; however, because of its sensitive mission, the commander of the Military Security Command reportedly has a direct line of communication to the Supreme Leader.

Government

- **Kim Yong-nam (85)** is a member of the Politburo Presidium (since 2010). As chairman of the SPA Presidium, he is considered the de facto head of state of North Korea. His real power, however, comes by virtue of his close ties to the Kim family and relationships throughout the leadership.¹³⁷ He was Kim Jong-il's senior at Kim Il-sung University. The two worked closely together in the 1960s to purge the Party of elements that opposed the *Suryong* system and the notion of hereditary succession. He is close to Kim Kyong-hui. His son, Kim Jung-il, was a vice director of Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat. Kim Yong-nam has long played an intermediary role and a stabiliz-

firm his status within the constituency of those who owe their positions to Kim, and who can be expected to remain fiercely loyal to the regime. Choe Pu-il was the only person promoted in Order No. 0036. See "Kim 'Repromotes' Choi Pu Il," *Daily NK*, 11 June 2013.

¹³⁷ Kim Yong-nam's deceased brother, Kim Du-nam, was a member of the Central Military Commission under Kim Il-sung and later became president of the Kumsusan Memorial Palace and chief of the Office of Military Officers in Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat. Kim Du-nam and O Kuk-ryol's patronage systems were very closely aligned and served as one of the Kim Jong-il's support networks within the North Korean military. Nicolas Levi, "A Big Day for the Elite Clans," *Daily NK*, 10 April 2012.

ing force within the senior leadership. He most likely has a direct channel to Kim Jong-un.

- **Choe Yong-nim (83)** is a member of the Politburo Presidium (since 2010). He served as the Premier from 2010 to April 2013, and currently serves as an honorary vice president of the SPA Presidium. His influence is based on his long service to the Kim family. In the 1950s, he was a vice director of the powerful KWP Organization Guidance Department, where he cemented ties with Kim Il-sung and his brother Kim Yong-ju (then head of the OGD). In 1973, Choe became the director of Kim Il-sung's Presidential Office. Given these close ties, he reemerged from several years of obscurity to assume the role of Premier in 2010—an obvious attempt by Kim Jong-il to surround the heir apparent with close family and associates. Beginning in 2011, the profile of the Premier was elevated in the North Korean media as Choe began to make his own economic-related guidance inspections separate from those of Kim Jong-un.¹³⁸ This seemed to reflect the Cabinet's growing institutional involvement in economic policy execution, in line with Kim Jong-un's decision to move away from his father's model, in which the Supreme Leader was personally involved in policy management, to a system where the apparatus takes responsibility for carrying out top-level decisions.¹³⁹ According to defector sources, Choe has weekly communications with Kim Jong-un as the person responsible for organizing the Tuesday meetings devoted to domestic and social matters (see discussion be-

¹³⁸ In February 2011, the North Korean media reported Premier Choe Yong-nim's visit to a construction site. This was the first time the media had reported on a leadership figure other than the Supreme Leader conducting a solo guidance inspection. See "DPRK Premier Visits Huichon Power Plant Construction Site," KCNA, 24 February 2011. Since this event, the media (as of July 2013) has reported over 300 such visits by the North Korean Premier (Choe Yong-nim and Pak Pong-ju).

¹³⁹ In April 2012, Kim Jong-un held a discussion with Party cadres in which he designated the Cabinet as the "unified command" of the economy, calling on "all sectors and units...to execute the decisions and instructions of the Cabinet" in economic matters. "DPRK Radio Carries Kim Jong-un's 'Work on Upholding Kim Jong Il, Chuch'e Cause,'" KCBS, 06 April 2012.

low).¹⁴⁰ While this responsibility may have passed to Pak Pong-ju, it is likely that Choe Yong-nim remains an active voice at the highest levels.

- **Pak Pong-ju (73)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2013). After having been removed as Premier in 2007 following a shift in policy away from the so-called "July 1 measure" to improve economy,¹⁴¹ he reemerged in 2012 when he was appointed director of the KWP Light Industry Department at the Fourth Party Conference. During this period, he was closely tied to Kim Kyong-hui, who gave up the Light Industry portfolio to become a KWP secretary. At the Central Committee Plenum (March 2013) and SPA (April 2013), Pak moved into the formal leadership of the Party and was reestablished as Premier—a clear signal to many Pyongyang watchers that North Korea will at some point attempt to resurrect the June Measures from 2012 or even re-embark on the more aggressive economic measures of the early 2000s. Pak allegedly has close ties to Jang Song-taek, who is rumored to have been the driving force behind the July Measures before he was purged in 2004. It is unclear whether Pak has a direct line of communication to Kim Jong-un. He may have to go through Jang Song-taek (as the "Control Tower"), but that could change as Kim Jong-un begins to focus more on the economy. According to one defector source, he has assumed the responsibility (from Choe Yong-

¹⁴⁰ Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

¹⁴¹ The July 2002 market liberalization reforms undertaken by North Korea were generally associated with four measures. The first was a basic monetization of the economy. The government abolished the coupon system for food rations, relaxed price controls, thereby allowing supply and demand to determine prices. Second, the government abandoned the artificially high value of the North Korean won, depreciating it from 2.2 won to US\$ 1, to 150 won to US\$ 1. Third, the government decentralized economic decisions. Fourth, the government pressed forward with special administrative and industrial zones to induce foreign investment. By 2005, political support for these measures began to wane and Pak Pong-ju was replaced at the Supreme People's Assembly in 2007, allegedly after conflicts with the military over his economic reform plans. See Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Jong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change*, op. cit.

nim) for organizing Kim Jong-un's Tuesday meetings on domestic and social issues.¹⁴²

- **Kang Sok-ju (74)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2010). His portfolio as vice premier focuses on foreign policy. Kang has been a major player in North Korean foreign policy since the 1980s when he was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For nearly two decades he has been the key advisor to the regime on negotiations and interactions with the United States, including serving as its chief nuclear negotiator. He was also often seen at Kim Jong-il's side during summits with regional powers (including China, Russia, and South Korea). His ties to the senior leadership give him additional influence. He is a cousin to Kim Jong-il, being related to Kim Il-sung's mother, Kang Pang-sok. His ties to Kim Kyong-hui and Kim Yong-nam go back to the 1970s, when all three served in the KWP International Department. While some of his responsibilities have been shifted to vice ministers of foreign affairs, he likely remains an influential strategist in helping Kim Jong-un leverage the international environment. He probably has direct talks with Kim Jong-un, but may have to gain access through Kim Kyong-hui or Jang Song-taek.
- **Ri Chol (aka Ri Su-yong) (72)** holds no official posts within the senior leadership, yet his influence and access are probably quite significant. His ties to the Kim family go back to the 1950s, when he was one of Kim Jong-il's cohorts at Mangyongdae Revolutionary Academy and Namsan Senior Middle School. He was North Korea's ambassador to Switzerland from the 1980s to 2010. He managed Kim Jong-il's finances in Europe and oversaw the education of Kim Jong-chol, Kim Jong-un, and Kim Yo-jong when they attended school in Berne, Switzerland. He is the former chairman of the Joint Venture Investment Commission, a government organization under the Cabinet that promotes foreign investment in North Korea and manages investment cooperative projects with foreign inves-

¹⁴² Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

tors.¹⁴³ He is rumored to have been the driving force behind the Egyptian telecommunications company Orascom deal that established North Korea's infrastructure for cell phone service.¹⁴⁴ Ri has also been tied to Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat and the secret family slush fund (worth billions) that is used to ensure the regime's support among the wider leadership.¹⁴⁵ It is likely that Ri Chol has occasional access to Kim Jong-un on issues related to Kim family finances. He also probably continues to work closely with Jang Song-taek,¹⁴⁶ especially on ventures involving China.

Key individuals in the third echelon of the leadership

The third echelon is composed of bureaucrats, military officers, and technocrats who are responsible for executing operations—many of whom hold positions on senior leadership bodies. They may have decision-making authority over the operations of their institutions, but these decisions are guided by higher-level decisions. They have limited influence and contact with Kim Jong-un other than during guidance inspections and field exercises. He may reach out to them for subject matter expertise. This is the level at which many of the fourth-generation leaders (who are currently in their 30s and 40s) will appear in the next few years. But for now, the more notable individuals in this echelon include those listed below.

¹⁴³ According to some sources, the JVIC actually reports up to Jang Song-taek in his role as vice chairman of the NDC.

¹⁴⁴ "Revealing the Mystery of North Korea's Investment Solicitation Office in Beijing," *Feng Huang Chou Kan*, 15 April 2013.

¹⁴⁵ "Kim Jong-un's Secret Billions," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 12 March 2013. After the Sixth Party Congress in October 1980, Ri Chol became a deputy director of Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat and deputy director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department. See "Ri Chol Biography," *North Korean Leadership Watch*.

¹⁴⁶ Ri's ties to Jang Song-taek most likely go back to the 1980s when Jang oversaw the portfolio for overseas Party guidance within the KWP Organization Guidance Department. See Lee Kyo-duk, et. al., *Study on the Power Elite of the Kim Jong Un Regime* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification Study Series 13-01, July 2013).

Party

- **Kim Yang-gon (74)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), KWP Secretary for ROK Affairs (since 2010), and director of the KWP United Front Department (since 2007). The United Front Department is the Party's intelligence agency dedicated to South Korean operations. Kim's role in facilitating dialogue between the two Koreas in the past was rarely acknowledged but was nevertheless highly significant. He is a cousin to Kim Jong-il and was one of the former leader's close confidants. He was responsible, in conjunction with Kim Jong-il, for signing off on all media pronouncements related to inter-Korean relations.¹⁴⁷ His influence under Kim Jong-un is not as clear. Because inter-Korean relations have (until recently) been frozen since the beginning of the Lee Myung-bak administration, the United Front Department's mission has been pushed into the background. Kim allegedly heads a task force that works on policy toward South Korea, which likely interacts with Jang Song-taek in his capacity as the Control Tower. This task force would presumably include representatives from the North Korean committees which make pronouncements on issues related to inter-Korean affairs. Examples are the Committee on the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, which is responsible for government-to-government issues; the Democratic Front for the Reunification of the Fatherland, which is responsible for Party interests in inter-Korean affairs; and the National Reconciliation Council, which deals with inter-Korean Humanitarian and nongovernmental organization issues. If North Korea chooses to engage the Park Gyun-hae administration, Kim Yang-gon's profile could begin to rise.
- **Kim Yong-il (69)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), the KWP Secretary for International Affairs (since 2010), and director of the KWP International Department (since 2010). A former ambassador to Libya and ambassador at large to North Africa and the Mediterranean, Kim Yong-il has ties to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs going back to the 1980s. He moved over to the KWP International Department in

¹⁴⁷ Author's interviews in Seoul, November 2012.

January 2010 as one of the architects of Party foreign policy strategy, especially with regard to Northeast Asia. He accompanied Kim Jong-il to China in 2010 and 2011, and recently met with Prime Minister Abe's advisor, Isao Iijima, when he came to Pyongyang on a secret visit in May (2013).¹⁴⁸ Together with Kang Sok-ju and Kim Yong-gon, Kim Yong-il represents the brain trust behind North Korean foreign policy. Kim Yong-il was a member of foreign affairs and national security meeting chaired by Kim Jong-un at the end of January (2013). According to reports, the major issue on the agenda for that meeting was the upcoming third nuclear test. Therefore, Kim Yong-il's role in the meeting was probably to explain likely regional reaction. Kim's line of communication to the senior leadership most likely goes through Kang Sok-ju and possibly Jang Song-taek (on issues related to China). His original ties to the senior leadership come through his former father-in-law, Jon Mun-sop.¹⁴⁹

- **Mun Kyong-dok (55)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), KWP Secretary for Pyongyang Affairs (since 2010), and chief secretary of the Pyongyang KWP City Committee (since 2010). At age 56, he is one of the younger Party leaders. His rapid rise is likely tied to his service in the Kim Il-sung Youth League, which is linked into the Jang Song-taek and Choe Ryong-hae patronage systems. He later served in the KWP Organization Guidance Department, where he was one of Jang's principal operatives in building political loyalty and a patronage network among second- and third-generation Party

¹⁴⁸ Kim Yong-il and Isao Iijima are believed to have discussed ways to address the issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁴⁹ Jun Mun-sop served in a number of critical positions under Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. He was a member of the KWP Central Military Commission, a vice minister of the People's Armed Forces, and a member of the Supreme People's Assembly. He took the post as honorary vice chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Standing Committee in September 1998. Jun reportedly took part in the armed struggle against the 1910-1945 Japanese colonial rule at age 18, and became a vice minister of public security in 1963, chairman of the KWP Central Control Committee in 1972, and a party Politburo member in 1976.

members.¹⁵⁰ Mun Kyong-dok's profile became public when he succeeded Choe Yong-nim as chief secretary of the Pyongyang KWP City Committee in July 2010. Because a beautification campaign inside Pyongyang is central to any political consolidation process, Mun has been the recipient of many taskings by the Kim family. Kim Jong-il began an aggressive construction program to make Pyongyang a "modern city." Kim Jong-un has continued this process, albeit at a more moderate pace. While this most likely does not give Mun Kyong-dok a direct line of communication to Kim Jong-un—he probably still has to go through Jang Song-taek in his role as the "Control Tower"—it does mean that his future is closely tied to that of the Supreme Leader. As Kim Jong-un consolidates his power, Mun Kyong-dok could move into the second echelon of the leadership.

- **Kwak Pom-gi (73)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2012), KWP Secretary for Finance (since 2012), and director of the KWP Finance and Planning Department (since 2012). He is a Kim Il-sung University educated planning economist and one of the cadre of technocrats who came into the leadership ranks in 2012 and 2013 along with Pak Pong-ju, Ro Tu-chol, and Paek Kye-ryong (KWP Light Industry Department director). Kwak's career began in the late 1960s and he moved into the Cabinet as a vice minister (Machine-Building Industry). But it was his appointment as chief secretary of the South Hamgyong Province (in 2010) that brought him to prominence. He was tied to the regime campaign celebrating "the flames of Hamnam" and regularly accompanied Kim Jong-il on guidance tours designed to highlight progress made in heavy industry.¹⁵¹ Kwak Pom-gi's elevation to the senior ranks of the leadership is likely tied to Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek

¹⁵⁰ "Mun Kyong-dok Biography," *North Korean Leadership Watch*. Mun Kyong-dok's close relationship to Jang Song-taek was highlighted by the fact that his career suffered a setback when Jang was purged in 2004 and was resurrected when Jang returned to the leadership center around 2006. In 2009, Mun, according to some sources, followed Jang Song-taek to the KWP Administrative Department as one of his deputies. See Lee Kyoduk, et. al., *Study on the Power Elite of the Kim Jong Un Regime*, op. cit.

¹⁵¹ "Kwak Pom-gi Biography," *North Korean Leadership Watch*.

with the expectation that he can bring some pragmatism to the decision-making process on the economy. His line of communication to Kim Jong-un most likely goes through Jang Song-taek.

- **Kim Pyong-hae (72)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), KWP Secretary for Personnel (since 2010), and director of the KWP Cadres Department (since 2010). He is one of several provincial Party secretaries to be brought to Pyongyang, not only as part of a generational turnover, but also to bring into the central leadership a better knowledge and technical understanding of regime operations at the regional level. Kim replaced the long serving holder of the personnel portfolio, Kim Kuk-tae,¹⁵² who was moved over to the Central Control Commission. This portfolio will be critical in the coming years as the inevitable turnover of the Party membership takes place.¹⁵³ Kim Pyong-hae's relationship to Kim Jong-un and his regents is unclear. He allegedly belongs to a group of Party leaders that follows Jang Song-taek.¹⁵⁴ His ties to North Pyongan Province, where he was Party secretary, suggest a possible link to Jang Song-taek. In 2002, during the regime's brief brush with economic reform, the Sinuiju Special Administrative Region was set up in the province. In the years since, Jang has had ties to the province in terms of economy and political control.
- **Thae Jong-su (77)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), KWP Secretary for General Affairs (since 2010),

¹⁵² Kim Kuk-tae still has ties to the leadership by virtue of his role as the head of the KWP Central Control Committee. He is also the son of Kim Chaek, the former Premier and his daughter, Kim Mun-kyong, is a vice director of the KWP International Department. Kim Mun-kyong worked with Kim Kyong-hui, when the latter served in the International Department in the 1990s.

¹⁵³ Reportedly internal North Korean documents are being circulated, which express Kim Jong-un's dissatisfaction with Party cadre for irregularities and corruption. "North Korea Says Certain Party Members Profiting from State Commodities," *Dong-A Ilbo Online*, 10 August 2013.

¹⁵⁴ See Lee Kyo-duk, et. al., *Study on the Power Elite of the Kim Jong Un Regime*, op. cit.

and the South Hamgyong Provincial Party Secretary (since 2012). He was a trusted associate of Kim Jong-il and has strong ties to both Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek.¹⁵⁵ In 2010, as Kim Jong-il was revitalizing the Party apparatus, he placed Thae in the sensitive post as director of the KWP General Department, which is in charge of the handling and transmission of Party documents. From this post, Thae would presumably have had direct access to Kim Jong-un, who began receiving reports from various parts of the regime, including the Party. In 2012, Thae Jong-su was sent back to the provinces to take up another sensitive post as Party Secretary of South Hamgyong Province, which is rumored to be a potential source of factionalism within the regime.¹⁵⁶ Although Thae most likely has direct links to Jang Song-taek, he may also have a direct line of communication to Kim Jong-un.

- **Col. Gen. O Il-jong (69)** is the director of the KWP Military Affairs Department. He is the son of O Jin-u, one of Kim Il-sung's closest associates and former minister of People's Armed Forces. O Il-jong was appointed to his current post in 2010 at the Third Party Conference, suggesting that his fortunes are closely linked to Kim Jong-un. He was promoted the next year (2011) to colonel general. As the director of the Military Affairs Department, O supervises reserve forces including the 4 million-strong Worker-Peasant Red Guards. Pyongyang watchers believe that O managed to get promoted thanks to his late father's influence, although he was a schoolmate of Kim Jong-il's quasi-exiled brother Kim Pyong-il, North Korea's ambassador to Poland.¹⁵⁷ His access to the senior leadership probably comes via Choe Ryong-hae, who is the KWP Secretary for Military Affairs.

¹⁵⁵ Thae Jong-su is also tied to other leaders within the third echelon. He and Kim Kye-kwan, first vice Minister of Foreign Affairs are brothers-in-law, both married to daughters of former vice premier Jong Il-ryong.

¹⁵⁶ "Hamgyong Province: Can there be Factionalism in North Korea?" *New International Focus*, 27 February 2013.

¹⁵⁷ "N. Korea Promotes Power Elite Ahead of Anniversary," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 14 April 2011.

- **Ri Jae-il** is the first vice director of the KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department. He came to the public's attention in 2005 when he began to appear on guidance inspections with Kim Jong-il. He was rumored to be close to the Kim family and may have had ties to Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat. Ri was one of a group of core elites who laid the foundations for the succession, and he played a major role in constructing the public legitimacy campaign around Kim Jong-un. He was ranked 120th on Kim Jong-il's funeral committee. Many have speculated that Ri may someday replace Kim Ki-nam as the head of the propaganda apparatus.
- **Hwang Pyong-so (66)** is a vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department. Born in 1946, he attended the Mangyongdae Revolutionary Academy and Kim Il-sung University. He came on the public scene in 2005 when he began to accompany Kim Jong-il on guidance inspections. In the period between 2007 and 2010, some Pyongyang watchers believe, Hwang began to work with Kim Jong-un to prepare him for his elevation to heir apparent.¹⁵⁸ At the Third Party Conference in 2010, he was appointed an alternate member of the Central Committee. He was promoted to colonel general in 2011 and was ranked 124th on Kim Jong-il's funeral committee list. He is a frequent cohort on Kim Jong-un's inspections. Based on his public appearances with both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, Hwang Pyong-so's portfolio appears to be tied to the regime's security organizations. He attended a joint Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un field inspection of the Guard Command's headquarters at KPA Unit #963 in 2011 and he was prominently seen in state media coverage of Kim Jong-un's inspection of the KPA Strategic Rocket Force Command in 2012.¹⁵⁹
- **Han Kwang-sang** is apparently the director of the KWP Finance and Accounting Department. He emerged on the political scene in January 2010 as part of Kim Jong-il's guidance inspection of the Hyangsan Hotel. He was identified as a first vice director

¹⁵⁸ "Biographical Profile of Hwang Pyong-so," *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 14 September 2012.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

of the KWP. In May 2012, his name began to appear before the heads of the first vice directors of the KWP Organization/Guidance and Propaganda/Agitation departments, something that suggested that he had been promoted to a director of a Central Committee department.¹⁶⁰ Han's promotion apparently came at the same time as Pak Pong-ju's elevation to director of the KWP Light Industry Department, which could indicate that Kim Jong-un looks to both manage critical funding streams inside the regime. The KWP Finance and Accounting Department manages the Party's funds and assets and is responsible for the welfare of cadres and employees working for the central Party apparatus.¹⁶¹ As such, Han most likely has some access to Kim Jong-un, the extent of which is currently unclear.

Military

- **Gen. Ri Pyong-chol** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010) and commander of the KPA Air Force (since 2007). Although Ri has been a known figure to Pyongyang watchers since 2007, interest in him spiked in 2011 when he accompanied Kim Jong-il to Russia, presumably to support a

¹⁶⁰ Prior to May 2012, Han Kwang-sang was listed as a KWP first vice director. In official lists, he always followed Kim Kyong-ok, the first vice director of the KWP Organization and Guidance Department, and Ri Chae-il, the first vice director of the KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department. In the pecking order of Central Committee departments, the Finance and Accounting Department is fourth behind the Organization and Guidance Department, the Propaganda and Agitation Department, and the Light Industry Department. When Han began to appear before these first vice directors, it was assumed by Pyongyang watchers that he had become a director. See "North Korea Promotes and Names Han Kwang-sang as director of the Finance and Accounting Department of the Workers' Party of Korea," *Yonhap Online*, 21 July 2013.

¹⁶¹ The KWP Finance and Accounting Department has traditionally had close ties to the Kim family. Ro Myong-kun, who used to be a carpenter and servant for Kim Il-sung, served as the director of the department from 1983 to 2001. His successor, Ri Pong-su, was reportedly dismissed following the death of Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Jong-il's fourth wife, in 2004. Following his removal, the director post remained vacant until Han's apparent appointment.

request for modern fighter aircraft.¹⁶² His profile has continued to rise since the advent of the Kim Jong-un era. In addition to being appointed to the Central Military Commission, he became a full member of the KWP Central Committee. He has spoken at a number of leadership events and has accompanied Kim Jong-un on a number of military-related guidance inspections. Ri's name has also been associated with the North Korean drone program.¹⁶³ He most likely does not have a direct channel to Kim Jong-un, but communicates up through the General Staff.

- **Col. Gen. Choe Kyong-song** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010) and commander of the 11th Corps (aka "Storm Corps"). He first drew attention from the Pyongyang-watching community in April 2010 when he was promoted to colonel general. These promotions, which came on the eve of Kim Il-sung's birthday, were handed out to "rising stars" of the Kim Jong-un era. The fact that Choe Kyong-song's name was the first called out among the five newly promoted colonel generals suggests his special relationship with Kim Jong-un. Later, at the Third Party Conference in September, he was made a member of the newly invigorated Central Military Commission—the only field corps commander appointed to the 19-member body. The 11th Corps is a special warfare command in nature, but is much bigger and more diverse in the range of its mission. Experts estimate that it has a force size of 40,000 to 80,000. It has some 10 brigades under its command, including a light infantry brigade called "Lightning," a combat air command called "Thunder," and a sniper brigade called "Thunderbolt."¹⁶⁴ Choe Kyong-song's formal chain of command runs through the General Staff, although he most likely also has a line of communication to O Kuk-ryol, who retains re-

¹⁶² "DPRK Desperately Seeking Cutting-edge Weaponry," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 29 August 2011.

¹⁶³ "Kim Jong Un Guides Drone Attack, Rocket Drills," KCBS, 20 March 2013.

¹⁶⁴ "Kim Cho'ng-u'n's Right-Hand Man?" *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 14 December, 2011.

sponsibility for crisis operations within the NDC. Although his direct ties to Kim Jong-un are unclear, he was one of only four commanders to speak at the December 17 loyalty pledge at Kumsusan Palace of Sun—something that earmarked him as having special status with regard to the Supreme Leader.¹⁶⁵

- **Lt. Gen. Kim Rak-gyom** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2012) and commander of the Strategic Rocket Force (since 2012). Kim emerged very quickly on the leadership scene in 2012, replacing Choe Sang-ryo, who had overseen the transformation of the Missile Command into the Strategic Rocket Force in 2011. At the Fourth Party Conference, Kim Rak-gyom was the only lieutenant general to be elected to the Party's Central Military Commission, a move which reflected the importance of the command within the armed forces, something made apparent with Kim Jong-un's speech on April 15 to the "bold soldiers of the People's Army, Navy, Air Force and Strategic Rocket Force." According to some sources, Kim Jong-un has a special attachment to the SRF in that it reflects the high tech part of the armed forces. During the March/April (2013) crisis, Kim Rak-gyom was one of four military officers pictured briefing Kim Jong-un against a backdrop of a map showing the ranges of North Korean missiles. The Strategic Rocket Force Command is a unified command of all short-, medium- and intermediate-range missile units under the National Defense Commission. Thus, Kim Rak-gyom most likely has direct channels of communication to a number of NDC members, including Kim Jong-un (First Chairman) and Pak To-chun/Ju Kyu-chang (members with portfolios for defense industry).
- **Col. Gen. Jon Chang-bok** is the first vice minister of People's Armed Forces. Appointed to his post in May 2013, Jon began to gain public prominence after he was elected member of the

¹⁶⁵ The other speakers were Ri Yong-gil (5th Corps commander), Jang Jong-nam (First Corps commander), Kim Hyong-ryong (Second Corps commander). Since then, Ri Yong-gil has become the director of the GSD Operations Bureau (and apparently chief of the General Staff) and Jang Jong-nam has become the minister of People's Armed Forces.

KWP Central Committee in September 2010 at the Third Party Conference.¹⁶⁶ This ties him politically to Kim Jong-un. Since then, he served as a member of the state funeral committees for Cho Myong-nok in 2010 (listed 61st out of 171 members) and Kim Jong-il in 2011 (listed 84th out of 232 members). The trust that the regime has in Jon was reflected in August 2011, when he was chosen to head a delegation of KPA logistical personnel to China, where he held talks with Liang Guanglie, China's state councilor and defense minister.¹⁶⁷ He began accompanying Kim Jong-un on visits to military and economic units in April 2012. Jon Chang-bok appears to be a rising star within the high command. His direct ties to Kim Jong-un are at this point speculative, but his career trajectory suggests that he may be someone that the young leader has plans for in the future.

- **Gen. Kim Myong-guk (72)** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 1995). He has been at the center of command and control of the Korean People's Army since the mid-1990s when he first became director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau. In 1996, he became the commander of the 108th Mechanized Corps before returning to the General Staff in 2004. He accompanied Kim Jong-il's hearse as the master of procession, walking alongside Kim Jong-un. Since Kim's assumption of power, Kim Myong-guk's profile has faded. He was replaced as director of the GSD Operations Bureau in 2012. It is not clear whether he retains his access to Kim Jong-un—he may do so as an adviser. Given his critical previous posts, he likely maintains strong ties throughout the high command and at lower echelons.
- **Col. Gen. Hyon Yong-chol (early 60s)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2013). His rise through the ranks parallels

¹⁶⁶ Before the Third Party Conference, the North Korean media had only referred to Jon Chang-bok on three occasions: when he was made a deputy to the 11th SPA in 2003, when he made a speech marking Kim Jong-il's birthday in 2006, and when he was promoted to colonel general in April 2010.

¹⁶⁷ Pyongyang radio, 25 and 27 August 2011.

the period in which Kim Jong-un became the heir apparent, which suggests that there could be a relationship between the two. For reasons that are still unclear, he was replaced as chief of the General Staff (a month after being raised to the Politburo), suggesting that his direct access to Kim Jong-un is most likely limited. He allegedly has been appointed commander of the Fifth Corps and demoted from a four-star to a three-star general.¹⁶⁸ While this seems like a demotion, he may have been given an important mission.¹⁶⁹ In such case, he most likely belongs in this third echelon of leaders who has occasional interaction with Kim Jong-un.¹⁷⁰

- **Col. Gen. Ri Pyong-sam (78)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2012). As the political director of the Korean People's Internal Security Forces, Ri manages the political indoctrination and Party life of members of the Ministry of People's Security and the Korean People's Internal Security Forces. He has been one of the most ubiquitous figures associated with Kim Jong-un's visits to internal security related units and facilities. He has served under four People's Security ministers, giv-

¹⁶⁸ Hyon Yong-chol's promotion path has not been smooth in recent years. In 2010, he became a four star general along with Kim Jong-un, Kim Kyong-hui, and Choe Ryong-hae. In 2012, he was promoted to Vice Marshal and demoted back to a four star general. On June 3 (2013), *Nodong Sinmun* carried photos of Hyon Yong-chol accompanying Kim Jong-un during an inspection of frontline sentry posts. He wore the epaulets of a colonel general (three stars). In his previous public appearance, when he accompanied Kim to the Yanggakto Football Stadium on April 30, he was wearing the rank of a full general (four stars).

¹⁶⁹ According to some South Korean sources, Kim Kyok-sik was given the mission of engineering provocations in the West Sea when he was moved from chief of the General Staff to commander of the Fourth Corps in 2009. In 2010, North Korea sank *Cheonan* and shelled Yeonpyeong Island. It was critical to have someone who the regime trusted to oversee those operations and ensure that escalation did not get out of hand. "North Korea's Hawkish Military Chief Resurfaces," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 23 May 2013.

¹⁷⁰ The North Korean press showed pictures of Hyon Yong-chol accompanying Kim Jong-un on an inspection of KPA units 507 and 549. *Nodong Sinmun*, 03 June 2013.

ing him a unique perspective on various patronage systems within the internal security apparatus. He was promoted to Lieutenant General in April 1992, and to Colonel General on April 13, 1999. Col. Gen. Ri was elected to membership on the Party Central Committee on September 28, 2010. On October 19, 2011, he was bestowed the title of Labor Hero by the SPA Presidium. His line of communication to Kim Jong-un most likely goes through Choe Pu-il, the minister of People's Security, although he may have an informal channel, given the apparent relationship he has developed with the Supreme Leader over the last two years.¹⁷¹

- **Gen. Pak Jae-gyong (80)** is a vice minister of the People's Armed Forces for external affairs. Before taking on this position in 2007, he was a central figure in the General Political Bureau. Along with Hyon Chol-hae, he was one of Kim Jong-il's closest military associates. He played a critical role in building support for Kim Jong-un within the KPA. In 2012, he gave a major speech on the occasion of Kim Jong-un being promoted to the rank of marshal in the Korean armed forces. While he continues to make appearances, his profile has fallen in recent years.¹⁷² He continues to make trips abroad and appear on leadership podiums, but he seldom is seen in leadership events involving Kim Jong-un.

Government

- **Yang Hyong-sop (87)** is a member of the Politburo (since 2010) and vice president of the SPA Presidium (since 1998). Born in 1925, Yang is a member of the first generation of North Korean leaders. He is also tied to the Kim family through marriage (Kim Jong-il's uncle-in-law and the son-in-law of Kim Il-sung's uncle (Kim Hyung-rok)).¹⁷³ His career has been spent in the

¹⁷¹ Ken E. Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*, op. cit.

¹⁷² This view is not shared by all Pyongyang watchers. See Lee Kyo-duk, et. al., *Study on the Power Elite of the Kim Jong Un Regime*, op. cit.

¹⁷³ Yang Hyong-sop is married to Kim Sin-suk, a cousin of Kim Il-sung (daughter of his father's sister).

SPA apparatus. He was elected chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly in 1983, after having been a vice chairman since 1962; in this capacity, he assumed the functions of de facto head of state after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, as the post of President of the DPRK was never re-assigned. In 1998, a new Constitution passed the President's powers to the President of the Presidium and Yang was replaced by Kim Yong-nam in that capacity. He occasionally receives foreign delegations and leads North Korean delegations abroad. He will likely be retired in the coming years, but for now he is one of the lynchpins within the regime that demonstrate continuity with both the Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung eras. His ties to Kim Jong-un are vague at best, and his communications with the senior leadership most likely are with Kim Kyong-hui and possibly Jang Song-taek.

- **Ro Tu-chol (62)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2012) and chairman of the State Planning Commission (since 2009). His ties to Kim Jong-un and the senior leadership are evident in his recent rise through the ranks. He assumed the post of State Planning Commission chairman in April 2009, shortly after Kim Jong-un was handpicked as a successor. In November 2012, he was appointed as the vice chairman of the State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Committee, a powerful “shadow leadership organization” headed by Jang Song-taek.¹⁷⁴ Ro has made frequent appearances at economy-related ceremonies. Along with Pak Pong-ju, he is one of the “young” technocrats who are well versed in external economic affairs. Like Pak, Ro built his knowledge of the economy through a number of government jobs and by working in the production field.¹⁷⁵ His appointment to the State Planning Commission and the Politburo has been interpreted by many Pyongyang watchers as an effort by Kim Jong-un to increase the level of pragmatism in leadership deliberations on economic development. His line of

¹⁷⁴ “Report on Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of WPK Central Committee,” KCNA, 04 November 2012.

¹⁷⁵ “The Group of Four Who Spearheaded the North's Economic Reform Are Making a 'Comeback' Under the Kim Jong Un Regime,” *Yonhap Online*, 20 August 2012.

communication to the senior leadership most likely goes through Pak Pong-ju and Jang Song-taek.

- **Paek Se-pong (74)** is a member of the National Defense Commission (since 2003) and chairman of the Second Economic Commission (SEC). Little is known about Paek's background. He has held positions as a notification instructor, Party Committee secretary, and primary Party Committee secretary in the factories and subordinate bureaus of the SEC. Prior to his appointment as SEC chairman, replacing Kim Chol-man, Paek served as the SEC's Party Committee secretary.¹⁷⁶ As chairman of the Second Economic Commission, Paek oversees North Korea's defense industrial complex, the country's largest employer and economic consumer. Paek Se-pong's ties to the senior leadership are vague. He has a direct line to Kim Jong-un, who is the first chairman of the NDC, but he most likely interacts with the senior leadership through Pak To-chun and Ju Kyu-chang, who have Party oversight responsibilities for defense industry.
- **Kim Kye-gwan (70)** is the first vice minister of foreign affairs (since 2010). He is the leading figure in international talks over the country's nuclear weapons program, including the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. He played a major role in the shutdown of the nuclear program in 2007, which followed extensive meetings with Christopher Hill, the U.S. assistant secretary of state. He also met former U.S. presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter when they visited Pyongyang in 2009 and 2010 to negotiate the release of U.S. citizens. He was one of the officials sitting around the table in the January 25, 2013, photograph of the so-called "national security meeting." While presumably he has formal meetings with Kim Jong-un, it is probably not one-on-one, but in concert with Kang Sok-ju.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ *North Korean Leadership Watch*.

¹⁷⁷ Kim Kye-gwan's relations with the Kim family are somewhat suspect. His wife served as a translator for Kang Song-ae and this allegedly undermined his standing with Kim Jong-il. See Kenneth E. Gause, "The North Korean Leadership: System Dynamics and Fault Lines," in *North Korean*

Key individuals in the fourth echelon of the leadership

There are a number of functionaries, technocrats, and military officers far down the chain of command who are largely unknown to the Pyongyang watching community but play a critical role in the regime. These individuals are mostly (but not exclusively) in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, who either have been handpicked by Kim Jong-un for key jobs within the regime apparatus or have a personal relationships with the new leader and, thus, have some access to him in the course of their work.¹⁷⁸ These are the up-and-coming North Korean leaders, who will likely assume critical positions as Kim consolidates his power. According to some reports, Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat is mostly populated with these fourth-echelon bureaucrats. For now, they are note-takers and act as Kim's eyes and ears on various parts of the regime. In the future, they could form critical lines of communication and serve in the role as trusted advisors. Table 1 lists some of the individuals believed to be part of this fourth echelon. Because of the difficulty of identifying North Korean leaders at this level, the list is speculative at best.

Table 1. Leading individuals in the fourth echelon

Name	Position	Comment
COL GEN Jon Jang-bok	First Vice Minister of People's Armed Forces	A hold-over from the Kim Jong-il era. Jon is responsible for the Rear Service General Bureau. Allegedly, Kim Jong-un has decided that for now positions responsible for military operations and rear area services should be retained by officers with authority and experience.
COL GEN Yun Tong-hyon	Vice Minister of People's Armed Forces	Received Kim Il-sung Order in 2007. Became alternate member of CC in September 2010 at the Third Party Conference. Was ranked 108 th on Kim Jong-il's funeral list. Spoke publicly to KCNA in 2012, vowing to destroy the South Korean regime. Delivered

Policy Elites (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis Paper P-3903, June 2004).

¹⁷⁸ Many have developed their relationships with Kim Jong-un through the course of his guidance inspections. Some now frequently accompany him on his visits, which suggests to Pyongyang watchers that they are particularly close to the new leader.

Name	Position	Comment
		speech at the Pyongyang Army-People Joint Meeting February 14 (2013) to mark the third nuclear test. Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in March 2012.
COL GEN Kang Phyo-yong	Vice Minister of People's Armed Forces	Appointed an alternate member of the CC in September 2010 at the Third Party Conference. Member of Kim Jong-il's funeral committee. Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in February 2013.
COL GEN Pak Tong-hak	Unknown (Military Officer)	Promoted to colonel general in 1999. Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in February 2013.
COL GEN Son Chol-ju	Vice Director for Organization or Propaganda of General Political Bureau	Allegedly served on the political committee of a front-line unit before coming into the GPB. Started accompanying Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in April 2012.
COL GEN Pak Jong-chon	Commander, Artillery Command	Frequent member of Kim Jong-un's guidance inspections of military units since April 2012.
LTG Son Jong-nam	Ranking officer in Korean People's Air and Air Defense Force Command	Appointed an alternate member of the CC in September 2010 at the Third Party Conference.
LTG Pak Jong-chon	Commander, Artillery Command	Frequent member of Kim Jong-un's guidance inspections of military units since April 2012.
LTG Ju To-hyon	Unknown (Military officer)	First public appearance came at a February 1, 2009 ceremony to vote for Kim Jong-il as a candidate to the 12 th SPA. This occurred one month after Kim Jong-un was announced as heir apparent within the North Korean leadership. Began to accompany Kim on guidance inspections in June 2013.
LTG Kim Thaek-gu	MPAF Vice Department Director	Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in February 2013.
LTG Ryom Chol-song	Unknown (Military officer presumably attached to the GPB)	Began accompanying Kim Jong-un in February 2013. Was part of a commemorative photograph taken in March 2013 with Kim and military propaganda officials, suggesting Ryom is affiliated with the GPB.
LTG So Hung-chan	Unknown (Military officer)	Began accompanying Kim Jong-un in May 2013.
LTG Kim Su-gil	Unknown (Military officer)	Promoted to Lieutenant General in April 2010. Accompanied Choe Ryong-hae to China in May 2013.
LTG An Ji-yong	Commander, Island Defense	Promoted to Major General in 2010. Began to accompany Kim Jong-un in August 2012 when he inspected island defense detach-

Name	Position	Comment
		ments stationed along the southwest front. Was part of Kim's cohort that inspected the Changjae Islet Defense Detachment and Mu Islet Hero Defense Detachment in March 2013.
MG Rim Kwang-il	Unknown (Military officer)	Interviewed by KCNA in August 2012 in conjunction with Kim Jong-un's inspection of island defenses. Accompanied Kim on inspection of a military exercise in February 2013. Has accompanied Kim on many military inspections related to coastal and island defense.
Hong Yong-chol	Unknown (presumably Military)	Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in February 2013.
Kwak Jong-gu	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1976) close to Kim Jong-un. ¹⁷⁹
Kwon Duk-gi	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1981) close to Kim Jong-un.
Kim Seok-il	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1965) close to Kim Jong-un.
Ri Chol-suk	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1989) close to Kim Jong-un.
Chin Jae-hwan	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1974) close to Kim Jong-un.
Ri Dong-won	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1976) close to Kim Jong-un.
Paek Nam-ryong	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1971) close to Kim Jong-un.
Choe Kwang-il	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1982) close to Kim Jong-un.
Huh Mun-seok	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1971) close to Kim Jong-un.
Paek Mun-kil	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1969) close to Kim Jong-un.

¹⁷⁹ “Anonymous Names 13 'High-level Military Cadres,’” *Daily NK*, 26 June 2013. Anonymous is the name of an international hacking group, which has allegedly broken into North Korean databases and stolen classified documents. Releasing the list, Anonymous described the names as belonging to “high-level North Korean military cadres.” The author has not yet been able to verify the names released in the *Daily NK* article. These names have never before appeared in the North Korean media. Therefore, readers should treat the names with caution.

Name	Position	Comment
Ri Eung-sun	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1969) close to Kim Jong-un.
Kim Myung-jin	Unknown (presumably Military)	Identified by Anonymous as a military officer (born in 1968) close to Kim Jong-un.
Hong Yong-chil	Unknown (Party official)	Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in February 2013—mostly to machine plants speculated to be associated with the defense industry. It is rumored that he holds a high-ranking position related to defense logistics in either the KWP Machine Industry Department or the Second Economic Committee. ¹⁸⁰ On March 17 (2013), the North Korean media published a photograph of him sitting in the front row with Kim and Pak To-chun at a "meeting of the Council of the Functionaries in the Munitions Industry Sector." ¹⁸¹
Ma Won-chun	KWP Finance and Accounting Department Vice Director	Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in May 2012. ¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ The South Korean media has speculated that Hong Yong-chil is a vice director of the KWP Machine Industry Department or a vice chairman of the SEC in charge of manufacturing munitions. See "Hong Yong-chil Accompanies Kim Jong-un on Some Inspections," *Yonhap Online*, 03 July 2013.

¹⁸¹ "Hong Yo'ng-ch'il, New Face Who Frequently Accompanies the North's Kim Jong Un on On-Site Guidance Trips, Draws Attention," *Yonhap Online*, 03 July 2013. In his 50s, Hong allegedly came to the attention of the North Korean leadership in 2011 when he received the title of "Labor Hero," the highest honor in North Korea. It was conferred on him in February 2011 while he was working as the Party Committee secretary of the Unsan Tool Plant, North Pyongan Province.

¹⁸² Ma Won-chun came to the notice of Kim Jong-il in 2000, when Ma was working at the Paektusan Architectural Institute. Kim brought him into the Party apparatus as the vice chief of the KWP Finance and Accounting Department's Design Office, which oversees the design of facilities exclusively used by the Kim family and other members of the senior leadership. Kim sent Ma to China in 2001 to learn Chinese construction techniques. Ma began accompanying Kim Jong-un on May 9, 2012, when the new leader conducted a guidance inspection of the Mangyongdae Amusement Park in Pyongyang. In addition to serving as a vice director of the KWP Finance and Accounting Department, Ma is also now the chief of the Design Office. See "Ma Won-chun: New Face Accompanying Kim Jong-un, 'North's Best Architect,'" *Yonhap*, 05 July 2013.

Name	Position	Comment
Choe Hwi	KWP First Vice Director (OGD or PAD)	At one point, Choe was a vice director of the Organization Guidance Department. In May 2013, he began to appear on Kim Jong-un guidance inspections with the title of first vice director.
Kim Sung-nam	KWP International Department Vice Director	A former advisor to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. He is one of the point men on China issues.
Pak Tae-song	KWP Department Vice Director	Received Kim Il-sung Order in April 2012. Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in August 2012. It is rumored that he works in the KWP Organization Guidance Department.
Ho Hwan-chol	KWP Department Vice Director	Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in January 2013.
Kim Tong-il	KWP Working Organization Department Vice Director	Appointed an alternate member of the CC in September 2010 at the Third Party Conference. Member of Kim Jong-il's funeral committee. Member of the State Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission. Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in April 2013.
Hong Sung-mu	KWP Machine Industry Vice Director	Hong is from the production and manufacturing side of the country's military and munitions industries (as opposed to his immediate superior Ju Kyu-chang, who comes from research and development). ¹⁸³ He came to the notice of many Pyongyang watchers when he appeared at Kim Jong-un's January 25 (2013) meeting with security and foreign affairs officials—days before the third nuclear test. Hong was ranked 126 th on the Kim Jong-il funeral list. He began accompanying Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in January 2013.
Maeng Kyong-il	KWP United Front Vice Director	Maeng is a former councilor of the Korea Asia-Pacific Peace Committee [KAPPC]. In 2005, he was a North Korean representative to the 16 th North-South ministerial-level talks.
LTG Choe Chun-sik	President of the Second Academy of Natural Sciences	Choe is thought to have presided over a successful missile launch last December (2012), and afterwards was given the honor of being

¹⁸³ “Biographical profile of Hong Sung-mu,” *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 04 February 2013.

Name	Position	Comment
		seated next to Kim Jong-un at a memorial held on the first anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death. He also attended the opening ceremony of the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where Kim Il-sung lies in state. ¹⁸⁴ Choe is presumed to be in his 50s or 60s.
Kim Tae-hui	Party Secretary of Kim Il-sung University	Son of Kim Chol-man, former Chairman of the Second Economic Commission.
Huh Chol	Party Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Son of Ho Dam, former Party secretary for inter-Korean affairs, and Kim Jong-suk, Chairwoman of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.
Kang Chi-yong	Director, Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland Secretariat	Kang's position on the CPRF Secretariat suggests that he is also a vice director of the KWP Unification Department. ¹⁸⁵ Kang was publicly vocal during the March/April crisis. Following the Supreme Command's abrogation of the Armistice Agreement, Kang made a speech in which he said that "the Supreme Command spokesman's statement is a firm statement of the revolutionary strong army of Mt. Paektu for the final victory in the great DPRK-U.S. confrontation that has continued across a century."
Ri Yong-nam	Minister of Trade	Nephew of Ri Myong-su, former Minister of People's Security.
Ri Song-ho	Minister of Commerce	Son-in-law of Kim Yong-chun, Vice Chairman of the NDC.

¹⁸⁴ According to one source, in the wake of the rocket launch, at least on the weapons development issues, Kim Jong-un appears to increasingly listen to Choe Chun-sik

¹⁸⁵ Kang Chi-yong was born in 1956 and graduated from Kim Chaek University of Technology. In 1988, he was vice chairman of the North Korean preparatory committee for North-South student talks; in 2002, vice chairman of the Korean Catholics Association Central Committee; in 2004, member of the North Korean preparatory committee for North-South joint overseas events for the implementation of the 15 June Joint Declaration; in 2009, director of the Bureau of Reception of Overseas Compatriots; and in 2010, chairman of the North Side Headquarters of the National Alliance for the Country's Reunification. In 2011, he was made director of the CPRF Secretariat, and was discharged as chairman of the North Side Headquarters of the National Alliance for the Country's Reunification and as director of the Bureau of Reception of Overseas Compatriots. See "ROK Ministry of Unification Profile of DPRK CPRF Secretariat Director Kang Chi-yong," *Pukhan Chuyoinsa Inmulcho'ngbo* 2013, 01 February 2013.

Name	Position	Comment
Ri Yong-ho	Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs	Son of Ri Myong-je, a former KCNA editor and vice director of the KWP Organization Department who served (in the 1980s and early 1990s) as a deputy director of Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat. Ri Yong-ho is the DPRK representative to the Six Party Talks. He is also an alternate (candidate) member of the KWP Central Committee and a third generation elite. He is a protégé of Kang Sok-ju.
Choe Son-hui	Vice Director in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Daughter of Choe Yong-nim.
Kang Ki-sop	Director of General Bureau of Civil Aviation	Member of Kim Jong-il's funeral list. Began accompanying Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in February 2013.
Ri Myong-san	Vice Minister of Foreign Trade	Son of Kim Yong-ju, Kim Il-sung's brother. Ri is a leading diplomat for South East Asian affairs.
Ja Tong-sop	Vice Minister of Commerce	Son of Kim Yong-chun, NDC Vice Chairman.
Ri Kwang-kun	Chairman of the Joint Investment Committee	Son of Ri Yong-ku, Kim Jong-il's former doctor. Protégé of Jang Song-taek. Former Minister of Foreign Trade.
So Ho-won	Vice Chairman of the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries	Son-in-law of O Kuk-ryol, Vice Chairman of the NDC.

There is another group of Kim Jong-un cohorts who may belong to this fourth echelon—personal friends drawn from the children of the North Korean elite. Most are in their 20s and 30s. While they may or may not hold key positions within the current leadership apparatus, their future rise within the official apparatus cannot be discounted.

Table 2. Same generation associates of Kim Jong-un¹⁸⁶

Name	Position	Comment
Kim Jong-chol	Kim Jong-un's older brother	Rumored to be working in either the KWO Organization Guidance

¹⁸⁶ For more information on these connections, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

Name	Position	Comment
		Department or the State Security Department.
Kim Yo-jong	Kim Jong-un's younger sister	Rumored to be working in the KWP Organization Guidance Department and her brother's Personal Secretariat.
O Se-hyon	Son of NDC Vice Chairman O Kuk-ryol	Rumored to be the head of the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group"), which is involved in illicit hard currency operations. ¹⁸⁷ May be an employee in the foreign department of the Ministry of Commerce. Has also been described in some reports as O's second son, O Se-won. ¹⁸⁸
Ri Il-hyok	Son of Ri Chol, former ambassador to Switzerland	Rumored to be involved with the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group").
Kim Chol	Son of SSD Director Kim Won-hong	Rumored to be involved with the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group"). Chairman of the Ryanggang Province People's Committee. Ryanggang Province is home to much of North Korea's defense industry.
Kang Tae-sung	Son of Vice Premier Kang Sok-ju	Rumored to be involved with the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group"). Head of a Foreign Trading Corporation (dealing mainly with European Countries).
Kim Chol-un	Son of the former Vice Director of Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat, Kim Chung-il	Rumored to be involved with the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group").
Kim Chang-hyok	Son of State Security Department Political Bureau Director Kim Chang-sop	Rumored to be involved with the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group").

¹⁸⁷ "North Korea Elite Linked to Crime," *Washington Times*, 25 May 2010. See also "N. Korea's 'Bonghwajo' Club Doing Drugs, Counterfeiting," *Dong-A Ilbo Online*, 18 April 2011.

¹⁸⁸ "Power Struggle Said Behind DPRK's Uncompromising Stance on Missile Launch," *Zakzak Online*, 10 April 2012. This article notes that O Se-wan is the head of the *Ponghwajo* group, which is involved in illicit drugs. It also contends that O was allied with Ri Yong-ho, the former chief of the General Staff.

Name	Position	Comment
Kim Song-hyon	Grandson of Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly Kim Yong-nam	No information available.
Choe Jun	Son of General Political Bureau Director Choe Ryong-hae	No information available.
Jang Yong-chol	Second son of Jang Song-u, elder brother of KWP Administrative Department Director Jang Song-taek	DPRK Ambassador to Brunei Darussalam. Previously served as ambassador to Malaysia and Pyongyang's top envoy to Nepal.
Jon Yong-jin	Husband of Jang Song-taek's elder sister	DPRK Ambassador to Cuba. Previously served as Pyongyang's top envoy to Sweden and Iceland.
Cha Chol-ma	Son-in-law of the Ri Je-gang, the late KWP Organization Guidance Department First Vice Director	Rumored to be one of the richest men in North Korea. He serves in a top position at the Mansudae Assembly Hall, the seat of the Supreme People's Assembly. Reportedly oversees a number of foreign currency earning businesses run by SPA's standing committees. He is also said to have expanded his wealth and business knowledge while serving as a diplomat at the DPRK embassies in China and Pakistan. ¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ “One of NK’s richest men said to serve in assembly hall,” *Yonhap*, 19 February 2012.

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The decision-making process

One of the central questions regarding the Kim Jong-un regime is how decisions are made. The process appears to have changed from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il, and presumably has changed again under Kim Jong-un. It is a process that is impacted by how the Supreme Leader utilizes the wider leadership environment, as well as by his leadership style. After a year in power, the growing consensus among Pyongyang watchers is that Kim Jong-un is the final decision-maker. However, there is fierce debate over how the decision-making process works. Is he in control, setting the decision-making space and arranging the agenda, as is his right under the dictates of the *Suryong* system?¹⁹⁰ Or, as some would argue, is he being buffeted by competing forces within the regime, such as the military? Although information on this issue is limited and comes through channels that still need to be vetted, the picture that seems to be emerging is much more complex than is often speculated in the open media.

Kim Jong-il's decision-making model¹⁹¹

The greatest strength, and potentially the greatest weakness, of the Kim Jong-il regime was what is often referred to as “closed-door politics” or “politics centered on close aides.” For Kim Jong-il, close-aide politics was a convenient “top-down” policymaking mechanism in which he could freely exchange opinions with trusted members of the leadership at the senior and lower echelons across all policy sectors. It was a system based on trust and loyalty, in which Kim was at the center and all power radiated from that center. Unlike other

¹⁹⁰ The author was privy to an extraordinary debate at the Korean Institute for National Unification that laid out the two leading theories on North Korean decision-making. Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

¹⁹¹ For a more extensive discussion of leadership and decision-making dynamics under Kim Jong-il, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Jong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

Communist systems, it was not centered on the Party as a leading mechanism for policy formation.

This was a major departure from how the system worked under Kim Il-sung. During the Kim Il-sung era, the Party's role in decision-making was clearly defined. The flow of decision-making consisted of a bottom-up component in addition to the top-down instructions from Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. New policy proposals in a department or ministry went to that institution's Party guidance committee, where they were reviewed and submitted to the relevant Central Committee department. A section chief would determine whether the policy proposal fit within established Party guidelines before sending it up to senior leadership (deputy director, first deputy director, or secretary) for approval. The department director (or Party secretary, if there is one for the department) would submit the policy proposal to the Party Secretariat to be placed on the agenda for an upcoming meeting, which would be chaired by the General Secretary. Once the General Secretary approved the policy proposal, it would be sent back to the appropriate Central Committee department, which would pass it back to the originating institution for implementation.¹⁹²

As Kim Jong-il's unitary guidance system became ingrained in the 1980s and 1990s, the formal policymaking process that characterized the Kim Il-sung era disappeared and was replaced by "report politics" and "crony politics" (i.e., close aide politics). Major policies increasingly were worked out through private channels, such as close aide gatherings (often drinking parties) at one of Kim's residences.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Dr. Pak Yong-taek, *Enhanced Position of the North Korean Military and Its Influence on Policymaking* (Seoul: Korean Institute for Defense Analysis, 2008).

¹⁹³ The banquet for close aides was a method originally designed by Kim Jong-il in the 1970s for the purpose of winning cadres over to his side prior to his designation as successor. After he was designated as the successor, these parties were used mainly for managing close aides and realizing closed-door politics. In terms of his own situational awareness, Kim instituted a process. On Thursdays, he would convene a meeting across all policy disciplines, where issues would be discussed. Then, usually on Saturdays, he would convene a drinking party for close aides for the purpose of drilling down on issues and working toward a decision. Au-

Kim's remarks at these meetings, as well as during his guidance inspections, were recorded and polished in writing before being conveyed to pertinent departments or made public through the media.¹⁹⁴

Kim Jong-il's leadership style

Laid over this web of close aide networks was a leadership style and set of processes that Kim used in order to run the regime on a day-to-day basis. Often described as "hub-and-spoke," Kim's leadership style operated on two levels. Within the formal bureaucracy, he held the key positions that gave him both authority and situational awareness. His positions of General Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party and Supreme Commander of the armed forces gave him control over the two most powerful elements of the regime. They also invested in him the legitimacy he needed to rule without obvious challenge. While unnamed, it was generally assumed that he also occupied the posts of director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department and director of the State Security Department, two institutions that allowed him to quickly identify and destroy any potential threat to his legitimate offices.

But even these formal trappings of power were not enough. Through close aide politics, Kim created an informal system that circumnavigated direct chains of command in order to give him alternate reservoirs of information. This allowed him to access information that might otherwise have been denied through formal channels. It also allowed him to keep tabs on the senior leadership. He did this by forming alliances with trusted individuals within key ministries and commands. This kept other senior leaders off balance and prevented them from using their bureaucracies as breeding grounds for anti-regime cabals and plots.

thor's interview of senior defectors in Seoul, April 2013. See also Hwang Chang-yop, *I Saw the Truth of History* (Seoul: Book Publisher Hanul, 1999).

¹⁹⁴ "Analysis of the DPRK Power Group," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 04 January 2007. Kim's remarks at close aide gatherings and on-the-spot inspections were all recorded, summarized as official documents, and then conveyed as instructions, or made into works such as *Selected Writings of Kim Jong-il*. Hwang Chang-yop, *Truth and Lies About North Korea* (Seoul: Unification Policy Institute, 1998).

What little is known about leadership decision-making under Kim Jong-il suggests that it was a much more informal process than existed under Kim Il-sung. As noted above, the process most likely began in close aide gatherings or during the inspection process. It was during these times that Kim set the broad parameters for policy, both domestic and foreign. Once the broad outlines were set, policymaking was usually initiated by a direct request from Kim in the form of an instruction. Sometimes this instruction went to a particular department or even a particular individual.¹⁹⁵ On other occasions, the instruction was farmed out to several relevant departments. Normally, more than one department was involved, and in these cases the instruction was managed through issue-related “task forces” that were organized to reach consensus.¹⁹⁶ In all circumstances, the KWP Organization Guidance Department made a note of Kim’s request so it could be tracked through the policy development process.

After sufficient consultation by the relevant departments, a counselor or group of councilors (in the case of a task force) wrote a policy draft which addressed Kim’s instruction.¹⁹⁷ It was then sent to Kim’s Personal Secretariat either as a “document report” [*mungo'n pogo*] or “fax report” [*mosa pogo*]. Reports submitted in document form included less urgent items time-wise, but still important policy-wise, such as “proposals,” “direction of activities,” and “situation materi-

¹⁹⁵ For example, Kim Jong-il’s instructions given to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were mostly in the form of “remarks addressed to the First Vice Foreign Minister.” In the past, this post was occupied by Kang Sok-ju. Now Kang is a vice premier and it is not clear whether the current first vice foreign minister (Kim Kye-gwan) plays this role.

¹⁹⁶ Issue-related task forces were set up for a range of policy initiatives, such as inter-Korean relations and the economy. Author’s interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Every ministry and department throughout the government and Party has councilors. Under Kim Jong-il, these were people, normally with close ties to Kim or his Personal Secretariat, who had a clear understanding of his policy intentions. It was their job to draft correspondence between their home ministry or department and the Kim apparatus. Author’s discussion with senior North Korean defectors residing in Seoul, April 2009.

als.”¹⁹⁸ Kim’s Personal Secretariat prioritized the reports and submitted them for his comment and/or approval.¹⁹⁹

According to elite defector accounts, Kim Jong-il used a series of formulaic handwritten notations to convey his approval or disapproval of proposals and reports that landed on his desk. These were the three main categories:

- "Signed Instructions" (*ch'inp'il chisi*) included a signature, a date, and occasionally a written opinion. Such a document was referred to as a “handwritten instruction,” By signing and dating the document, the Leader signified that the contents of report documents should be regarded as his intentions and instructions to be implemented the way they were and that he would personally take responsibility for their results as well. Such documents carried the weight of verbal instructions and were implemented unconditionally.
- "Signed Documents" (*ch'inp'il mungo'n*) included the date of review without Kim’s signature or comment. Such a document was referred to as a “handwritten document.” By merely dating the document, the Leader signified that he agreed with the contents of the report but would not be responsible for the results—even though, like a “handwritten instruction,” it was considered sanctioned policy and had to be implemented to the letter.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ These reports are registered at the KWP’s Confidential Documents Bureau after the final approval of the department or ministry’s leadership is received. They were then sent to the Kim Jong-il Personal Secretariat where they were prepared for his approval. Hyon Song-il, *North Korea’s National Strategy and Power Elite*, op. cit.

¹⁹⁹ Kim’s secretariat was not authorized to reject any document without first receiving his approval. Hyon Song-il, *North Korea’s National Strategy and Power Elite*, op. cit.

²⁰⁰ A distinction was made between a “handwritten instruction” and a “handwritten document” in early 1990s as the volume of guidance from Kim Jong-il’s office increased dramatically leading to laxity in interpretation during the implementation process. Hyon Song-il, *North Korea’s National Strategy and Power Elite*, op. cit.

- Document returned unsigned or dated. This signified that the Leader either did not agree with or did not understand the document report. It also probably meant that the counselor and his chain of command did not accurately judge the Leader's intentions—something that probably carried with it criticism and punishment.²⁰¹

Once a document was ratified by Kim, it became policy. Upon receipt of the policy guidance from Kim's Personal Secretariat, the originating institution of the document report was responsible for its implementation. The person charged with overseeing the implementation of the policy then registered it with the institution's records office and drew up a "policy implementation plan." This plan laid out the method of implementation, the relevant department/ministries responsible for implementation, and the timeline for implementation. The policy could now be monitored by the institution's organization department, which submitted progress reports to the KWP Organization Guidance Department.²⁰²

Kim Jong-un's evolving decision-making process

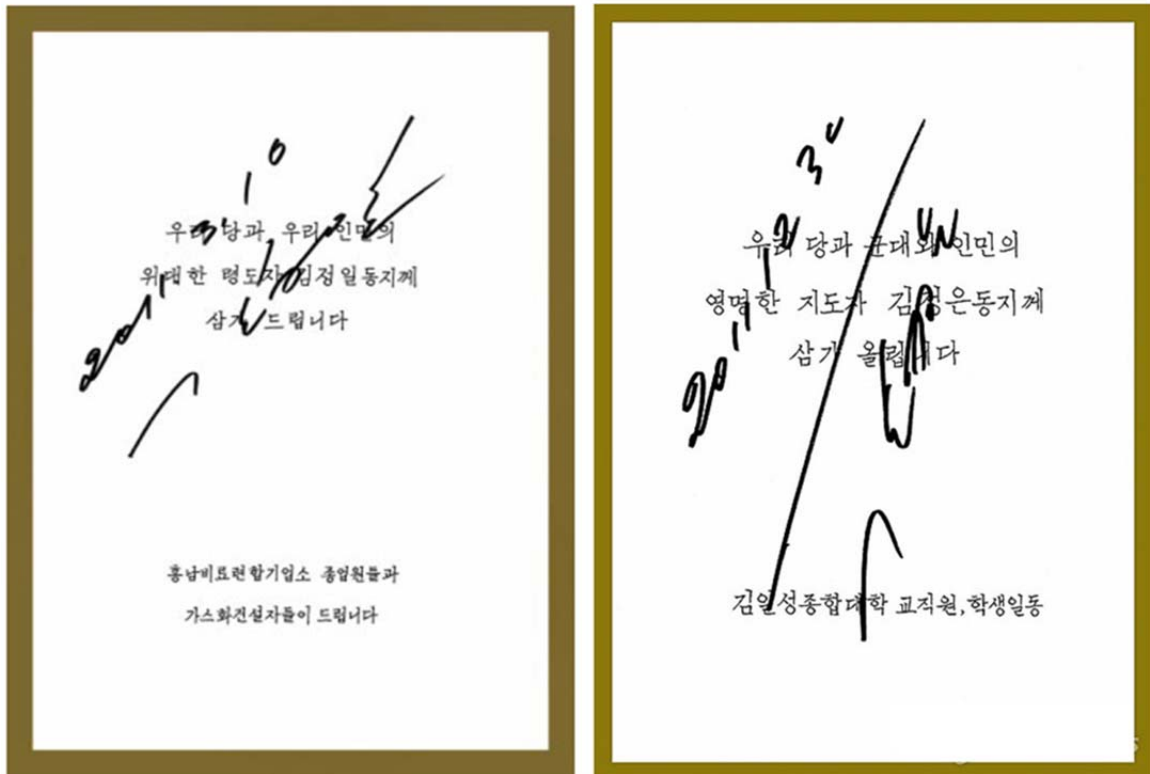
Kim Jong-il's decision-making process took decades to develop and was dependent on wide ranging relationships across the regime. It was unlikely that Kim Jong-un could have easily stepped into this hub-and-spoke model since it is so personality dependent and requires a deep inside knowledge of regime politics, policies, and processes. He is 29 and was only designated his father's successor in 2009. In other words, he has had only four years to learn on the job, whereas Kim Jong-il had nearly 30 years between the time he entered the Party apparatus in the early 1960s and Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. Yet, the regime has gone to great lengths to show Kim Jong-un as the leader and ultimate decision-maker.

- In January 2012, the North Korean media unveiled photographs of Kim Jong-un's signature and noted that he would

²⁰¹ Hyon Song-il, *North Korea's National Strategy and Power Elite*, op. cit.

²⁰² Ibid.

continue his father's practice of directly reviewing and signing off on policy recommendations and other internal reports.²⁰³



Kim Jong-il's signature is on the left and Kim Jong-un's is on the right (Source: KCNA, *Nodong Sinmun*).

- As the year came to a close, North Korean television broadcast a documentary that showed Kim Jong-un chairing a Politburo

²⁰³ Photographs of Kim Jong-un's signature (attached to loyalty pledges from various institutions throughout the regime) appeared for the first time in *Nodong Sinmun* on December 2, 2011. The regime probably decided to release the photographs in order to show that Kim Jong-un was in control and was the ultimate decision-maker even if a collective group of advisers might have had significant input into the policy deliberation process. This was not a first instance of the media revealing the Supreme Leader's signature. There were at least 100 cases dating back to 1981, when state media reported Kim Jong-il's signature on internal reports. See Alex Melton and Jaesung Ryu, "Wanted: Handwriting Analyst," *North Korea Witness to Transformation*, 05 February 2012; "Kim Jong-un's Handwriting Shows Chip Off the Old Block," *Chosun Ilbo*, 24 January 2012.

meeting in which he conveyed the news of Kim Jong-il's death.²⁰⁴



This is reportedly a Politburo meeting from December 2011 when Kim Jong-il announced his father's death (Source: KCTV/KCNA screen grab as appeared on *North Korean Leadership Watch*).

- On January 27, 2013, *Nodong Sinmun* reported that Kim Jong-un had convened a meeting of national security officials two days earlier (January 25, Friday) to discuss “the grave situation

²⁰⁴ The Politburo scenes are in the fourth part of the documentary film *We Will Hold the Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong Il in High Esteem Down through Generations*. The 90-minute fourth installment of the official documentary film series chronicled the death and funerary rites of Kim Jong-il during December 2011. Entitled *The Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong Il Will Live Forever*, it was released to mark the one-year anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011. See “Film Released to Mark 1 Year Anniversary of KJI's Death,” *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 13 December 2012.

prevailing in the DPRK.”²⁰⁵ This was the first time that the North Korean media had made public such a leadership meeting.²⁰⁶ The report was accompanied by photographs showing Kim Jong-un sitting around a conference table with Gen. Choe Ryong-hae (director of the KPA General Political Bureau), Gen. Hyon Yong-chol (chief of the KPA General Staff), Gen. Kim Won-hong (director of the State Security Department) Pak To-chun (KWP Secretary for Defense Industry), Kim Yong-il (KWP Secretary for International Affairs), Hong Sung-mu (KWP vice director of the Machine-Building Industry Department), and Kim Kye-gwan (first vice minister of foreign affairs). During the meeting, Kim was briefed about “the new situation and circumstances prevailing on the Korean Peninsula and in its vicinity.” In response, “[he] expressed the firm resolution to take substantial and high-profile important state measures in view of the prevailing situation as the stand had already been clarified by the National Defense Commission and the Foreign Ministry of the DPRK through their statements that powerful physical countermeasures would be taken to defend the dignity of the nation and the sovereignty of the country. He advanced specific tasks to the officials concerned.” Many believe that this was the meeting in which the upcoming third nuclear test was discussed.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ The meeting reportedly focused on the international community’s reactions to the April 2012 and December 2012 launches of the U’nhwa-3 rocket and the subsequent UN sanctions.

²⁰⁶ Cheong Seong-chang, “Process for Policymaking Regarding National Security,” *Vantage Point* 36, no. 4 (Seoul: Yonhap News Agency), April 2013).

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.* In addition, many Pyongyang watchers in Seoul suggested that the regime wanted to show a formal process of Kim Jong-un meeting with a “national security council-like body.” This could be a decision-making structure that Kim would like to put into place someday instead of the current one. Others contend that may have been an abbreviated version of Kim Jong-un’s Friday national security meetings (to be discussed later). Author’s interviews in Seoul, April 2013.



National Security meeting reportedly held on January 25, 2013. From Kim Jong-un's left are: Kim Kye-gwan, Kim Yong-il, Gen. Kim Won-hong, Gen. Choe Ryong-hae, Gen. Hyon Yong-chol, Hong Sung-mu, and Pak To-chun (Source: KCNA).

- On February 3, the North Korean media reported that Kim Jong-un chaired an expanded meeting of the KWP Central Military Commission,²⁰⁸ which was attended by the staff of the KPA Supreme Command, commanding officers of KPA large combined units (*taeyonhap pudae*), senior commanders of the KPA Navy, KPA Air and Anti-Air Forces and the KPA Strategic Rocket Force Command. Characterized as an “enlarged meeting of the CMC,” this was the first time the North Korean media had carried photographs of an important military gathering. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss “the issue of bringing about a great turn in bolstering up the military capability, true to the Military-First revolutionary leadership of the Korean Workers’ Party, and an organizational issue.” At the meeting Kim Jong-un delivered a speech “which serves as guidelines for further strengthening of the KPA into a matchless revolutionary army of Mt. Paektu and defending the security and sovereignty of the country as required by the Party and the

²⁰⁸ *Nodong Sinmun*, February 3, 2013.

developing revolution.”²⁰⁹ Many Pyongyang watchers believed that this was part of the authorization chain for a nuclear test to proceed.²¹⁰



An enlarged meeting of the KWP Central Military Commission which reportedly took place in February 2013 (Source: KCNA).

- During the period of rising tension and shortly after U.S. B-52s sortied over South Korea, on March 29 (2013), *Nodong Sinmun* revealed a series of photographs of Kim Jong-un receiving a military briefing from Kim Rak-gyom (Commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces), Ri Yong-gil (Director of the GSD Operations Bureau),²¹¹ Hyon Yong-chol (Chief of the General Staff), and Kim Yong-chol (Director of the General Reconnaissance Bureau). According to the report, MAR Kim Jong-un, in his capacity as Supreme Commander, convened the operational meeting in the early morning hours at the Supreme Command headquarters “to discuss “the KPA Strategic Rocket Force's performance of duty for firepower strike.” After receiving a report from Lt. Gen. Kim Rak-gyom on the technical conditions of the strategic strike means of the KPA, the report noted, Kim Jong-

²⁰⁹ For a detailed overview of this meeting, see *North Korean Leadership Watch* for 3 February 2013.

²¹⁰ See, for example, *North Korean Leadership Watch* for 3 February 2013. As this article noted, the “CMC is one body (the NDC being in the other in joint coordination) which authorizes and has oversight of military industry production, research and development.”

²¹¹ It was this report that revealed Ri Yong-gil’s new position as director of the GSD Operations Bureau. *Nodong Sinmun*, 29 March 2013.

un “made an important decision...[and] signed the plan on technical preparations of strategic rockets of the KPA, ordering them to be on standby for fire so that they may strike any time the U.S. mainland, its military bases in the operational theaters in the Pacific, including Hawaii and Guam, and those in South Korea.”²¹² This was a not so subtle effort to portray Kim Jong-un as a military leader and decision-maker. Surrounding him and his briefers were maps showing the Strategic Rocket Force’s Plan for Striking the U.S. Mainland and an Order of Battle of North Korean Forces. This came days after Kim had issued an order through the Supreme Command to place the armed forces on “Combat Duty Posture 1,” the highest level of readiness. Not since the days of Kim Il-sung (via documentaries) had the North Korean media shown the Supreme Leader in such a martial setting.



13 March 2013 military briefing for Kim Jong-un. Standing behind Kim Jong-un are from left to right: Lt. Gen. Kim Rak-gyom (Commander of the KPA Strategic Rocket Force Command), Col. Gen. Ri Yong-gil (Chief of the KPA General Staff Operations Bureau), Gen. Hyon Yong-chol (Chief of the KPA General Staff), and

²¹² *Nodong Sinmun*, 29 March 2013.

Gen. Kim Yong-chol (Chief of the Reconnaissance General Bureau and Vice Chief of the KPA General Staff) (Source: *Nodong Sinmun*).

While there is debate within the Pyongyang watching community over whether these photographs and reports are a reflection of actual meetings or staged events for the purpose of building legitimacy around Kim Jong-un as the Supreme Leader, there is a general consensus that much of the decision-making process is hidden from sight. Over the last few months, a line of information has begun to emerge through defector channels that suggests a process was put in place soon after Kim Jong-il's death for making decisions. It is based on a framework that both manages the decision-making process while providing Kim Jong-un with the situational awareness he needs as the final decision-making authority. It also creates an environment whereby he can develop the relationships across the leadership he will ultimately need in order to consolidate power. The sections below discuss this process, but the reader should treat this information with caution. It has not been vetted and may at best be illustrative of a process whereby a totalitarian regime educates a young and untested leader who has been thrown into a position of responsibility well before his time.

The role of the Control Tower

The term “Control Tower” (*000 Chong Kwal Bon Bu*)²¹³ came into the North and South Korean lexicons during the Kim Jong-il period. It was a term well suited to Kim's hub-and-spoke leadership style. While the term was sometimes ascribed to the Party, it was generally understood that the “Control Tower” resided in the individual of the Supreme Leader, who provided command directives and guidance to the core organs of the Party, government, and military. However, since Kim Jong-un has not consolidated absolute power, many believe he would not be capable of smoothly controlling the various agencies focused around the Control Tower.²¹⁴ The absence of a strong central

²¹³ The literal translation would be “Chief Command Headquarters for 000 Affairs.”

²¹⁴ For example, with the intensifying loyalty competition among the elites, Kim Jong-un may not be able to restrain them from engaging in destabilizing power struggles.

Control Tower could thus become, as one Pyongyang watcher noted, “the greatest source of uncertainty as the Kim Jong-un regime ventures into the unknown without a manual.”²¹⁵

There is a growing consensus among many Pyongyang watchers that with Kim Jong-il’s death, the “Control Tower” role did not pass to Kim Jong-un, but to Jang Song-taek.²¹⁶ This would not be surprising given the role Jang played in the months after Kim Jong-il’s stroke in 2008 when he (working with Kim Kyong-hui and Kim Ok) assumed much of the Control Tower responsibilities. According to one source, Jang’s role during this period was to receive orders from Kim and channel them to state agencies.²¹⁷ In other words, acting like a stand-in coordinator for day-to-day state affairs. This ensured that if Kim died, the notion of the “Control Tower” would not collapse.

Since Kim’s death, the North Korean media’s treatment of Jang Song-taek has been unique and in many respects unprecedented. In November 2012, an enlarged meeting of the Politburo established the State Physical Sports and Culture Commission, a 32-member organization which will manage sports and athletics in North Korea.²¹⁸ Jang Song Taek was appointed chairman of the commission. While the North Korean media described the mission of the new commission “would be...to control the overall sports work of the country in a unified manner,” an examination of its membership reveals a who’s who of many of the regime’s senior leadership in the Party, military, and Cabinet. In other words, some Pyongyang watchers suggest, it is a shadow government which gives Jang the ability to convene official meetings of senior leaders without being accused of trying to undermine the legitimacy of Kim Jong-un (who is not a member).

²¹⁵ Choi Jin-wook, *The Dawn of the Kim Jong Eun Regime and the Choice for North Korea* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification, Online Series CO 12-17, 15 May 2012). Choi Jin-wook is the current acting director of KINU.

²¹⁶ Author’s interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

²¹⁷ “DPRK Leader's In-Law Gaining Power,” AFP, 11 November 2008.

²¹⁸ “Report on Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau of the Workers Party of Korea Central Committee,” KCBS, 04 November 2012.

Several months later, Jang Song-taek's position within the regime began to be heralded as second only to Kim Jong-un. He was referred to as the "eminence grise," who was at ease with his power. In February (2013), this hubris was on display at the Fourth Meeting of Party Cell Secretaries where he was caught on state television aired footage sitting in the background with his left arm leaning against the armrest of his chair or staring off into the distance while Kim Jong-un was delivering a speech. This apparent lack of interest in the proceedings was in stark contrast to the rest of the leadership on the podium, who sat stiffly looking straight ahead. According to one ROK Defense Ministry official, "We've frequently spotted Jang Song-taek looking unfazed by Kim Jong-un's presence and we are repeatedly hearing rumors that he is the person who is really in power in the North."²¹⁹



Kim Jong-un speaking at the Fourth Meeting of Party Cell Secretaries. Jang Song-taek is circled. (Source: KCNA)

In terms of Jang's daily role and function as the "Control Tower," there is not much information, but a great deal of speculation. His responsibility seems to center on ensuring that existing policies (already established by a Supreme Leader decision) are executed and

²¹⁹ "N. Korea's Eminence Grise at Ease in Power," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 10 February 2013.

the appropriate oversight and follow-up are carried out.²²⁰ He interacts with the various policy task forces, making decisions that are required to keep policies on track.²²¹ This would have been something Kim Jong-il did in the past and because of the amount of documents generated to ensure that the regime continued to function, often decisions were not made in a timely manner. It is probably too much to expect that Kim Jong-un could carry out this role while still learning how to manage the regime's politics.²²² To ensure that Kim is informed on this process, he receives reports from all sectors of the government, Party, military, and security services.²²³ With the possible exception of military reports, Jang receives these reports first. He is allegedly allowed to provide comment on them and even work with Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat to prioritize them. However, he is not allowed to change anything in the reports.²²⁴ If a Supreme Leader decision is needed to either embark on a new policy line or deconflict policy options, Jang Song-taek would presumably advise his

²²⁰ According to one South Korean Pyongyang watcher, the Control Tower today (unlike under Kim Jong-il) is not a decision-making post. While it retains many of the hub-and-spoke administrative functions of the past, final decisions rest with the "royal family" (i.e., Kim Jong-un and possibly Kim Kyong-hui). Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

²²¹ Author's interviews with senior-level defectors in Seoul, April 2013.

²²² There are some indications, however, that Kim Jong-un himself on occasion (maybe through Jang Song-taek) establishes special working groups to provide advice and options on matters of policy. In the days after Kim Jong-il's death, it is rumored that Kim Jong-un instructed the Cabinet to establish a "study group to prepare for reforms in the economic management method." This group produced a set of recommendations and policy directives that would set the foundation for the June 28 policy directives, which will be discussed later in this paper. See Park Hyeong-jung, *One Year into the '6.28 Policy Directives': Contents and Progress* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification Online Series Co 13-18, July 2013).

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid. According to one source, "Jang Song-taek shares major documents that are reported to Kim Jong-un and appears to be deeply involved in major policy decisions, advising Kim on all state affairs." This most likely reflects his dual role as a senior regent to Kim Jong-un and the "Control Tower." "N. Korea's Eminence Grise at Ease in Power," op. cit.

nephew on the courses of action and help him through the decision-making process. According to numerous sources, the Supreme Leader reporting/approval system (described above) is still in place. This would suggest that all documents carry Kim Jong-un's, not Jang Song-taek's, signature—a vital practice to ensure the legitimacy of the *Suryong* system.²²⁵

Where strategic level decisions are made

While the “Control Tower” can handle the day-to-day affairs of the regime, there will be times when the regime needs to make course corrections or lay down new strategic guidance. This is a decision only the Supreme Leader can make. When these occasions arise, as suggested above, Kim Jong-un most likely meets with one or more of his regents, who can provide context and make him aware of the consequences inside the regime if he were to take one or another decision. As time passes and the overarching guidance that Kim Jong-il laid down in his last will and testament becomes less relevant to the issues confronting the regime, these decisions will be made.²²⁶ If Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power, he will be able to take these decisions on his own. But if not, Kim will have to rely on his closest advisors, working with his Personal Secretariat, to set up the agenda, present the options, and ensure that his decisions are taken for action.

Tuesday/Friday meetings

One of the questions that frequently arises when discussing the transfer of power from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un is how has the latter been trained to step into the shoes of the Supreme Leader. His father had nearly thirty years to prepare for the day when Kim Il-sung died. Kim Jong-un was only made heir apparent inside the regime in January 2009 and assumed this post formally at the Third Party Conference in September 2010. Kim Jong-il died a little over a year later.

²²⁵ Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

²²⁶ In the near term, however, it can be assumed that Kim Kyong-hui, executor of Kim Jong-il's last will and testament, will play an important role in such decisions.

Since his formal designation as heir apparent, the North Korean media began to report on Kim Jong-un's guidance inspections with his father, something that apparently began much earlier before he even became the designated successor. Even though he continues to make frequent guidance inspections as the Supreme Leader, is this his only on-the-job training? Is this the only method by which he learns about the details and nuances of the situation throughout the regime and the impact that policies are having on the various constituencies, nothing to say of the lives of the ordinary citizens? Recent defector reporting suggests this is not the case. There is, in fact, an institutional process that has been designed to both inform and educate Kim Jong-un and prepare him for the awesome responsibilities of a job that in many respects demands micro-management.

According to one well informed source with contacts inside North Korea, in the week after Kim Jong-il's death, Kim Jong-un began to hold twice weekly meetings on Tuesday and Friday afternoons with top officials from across the regime—Party, government, and military.²²⁷ These meetings, which reportedly include on average between 20-30 people and are sometimes restricted to less than 10, appear to serve two functions. First, they give Kim Jong-un situational awareness on issues of importance across the regime. He has a chance to discuss policy with the individuals directly responsible for policy execution. Second, the meetings allow Kim to develop the face-to-face relationships that will be critical if he is going to consolidate power. Before each meeting, the agenda is set by Kim's Personal Secretariat in consultation with Kim Kyong-hui, Choe Yong-nim (or Pak Pong-ju), and Jang Song-taek. A combination of these individuals meet with Kim Jong-un to discuss the issues and decide on the agenda. The Personal Secretariat then circulates the agenda to the participants. After each meeting, there is an evening dinner which allows for a more relaxed

²²⁷ Author's interview in Seoul, April 2013. See also Cheong Seong-chang, "Process for Policymaking Regarding National Security," *op. cit.* These meetings appear to be a modified continuation of Kim Jong-il's decision-making process before his stroke, when he held large, regime-wide meetings on Thursdays. These meetings dealt with issues across the policy spectrum. They were followed up by Saturday evening drinking parties at one of Kim's residences, where discussions critical to decision-making were held.

setting for continued conversation and relationship building.²²⁸ It should be stressed, these are not decision-making meetings. Kim Jong-un makes decisions outside of the context of these meetings.²²⁹

- **Tuesday Meeting.** The meeting on Tuesday focuses on domestic and social issues. Choe Yong-nim was until recently responsible for organizing this meeting in consultation with Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat. It is currently not clear whether he has retained this responsibility since giving up the post of Premier to Pak Pong-ju. Both Choe and Pak have carried out on-going inspections across economic related entities. Unheard of in the Kim Jong-il era, the Premier now appears to be actively engaged in information gathering for the center and, as such, would be one of the Supreme Leader's closest advisors on domestic matters. Presumably the Tuesday meetings include individuals with relevant and critical portfolios inside the Party and government. From the Party, regular invitees likely include: the KWP secretaries for Light Industry, Education, Pyongyang Affairs, Propaganda and Agitation, General Affairs, Personnel, and Finance, as well as relevant KWP department directors and provincial secretaries. From the Cabinet and wider government, regular invitees likely include: the Premier, vice premiers, relevant ministers, relevant SPA leadership, and the head of the State Planning Commission.²³⁰
- **Friday Meeting.** The meeting on Friday focuses on military and security matters, as well as particularly sensitive foreign policy issues, such as inter-Korean relations and North Korea's ties with China and the United States. Kim Kyong-hui, in her role as guarantor of the Kim Family equities, is responsible for pulling together this meeting and reportedly takes the lead in preparing her nephew in a private meeting beforehand (possibly with Jang Song-taek and Kim Kyok-sik). Presumably the Friday meeting includes top officials from the Central Military Com-

²²⁸ Allegedly, the Friday dinner party includes participants from both the Tuesday and Friday meetings. Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

²²⁹ Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

²³⁰ Ibid.

mission, the National Defense Commission, and the Cabinet. Friday meetings, more so than the Tuesday meetings, may also take place in a much smaller setting, depending on the sensitivity of the issues under discussion. The January 25 meeting, which was on a Friday, suggests that this may not be an uncommon occurrence.²³¹



Kim Jong-un receiving a briefing at a defense industry consultative meeting (Source: KCTV).

While Jang Song-taek may be involved in the preparatory meetings before the Tuesday, and possibly the Friday, meeting, defector sources agree, he is not part of either meeting. This would suggest that Kim Jong-un uses these meetings as an alternative source of information to that which he receives from the “Control Tower” channel. They

²³¹ Ibid. See also Cheong Seong-chang, “Process for Policymaking Regarding National Security,” *op. cit.* According to one source, this National Security Council meeting was similar to the Tuesday/Friday meetings, but was probably convened for a special reason. It reportedly took place around midnight.

could also serve as a useful venue for Kim to discuss existing policies and receive inputs and advice beyond what he receives from his regents. Although it is yet to be confirmed whether these meetings occur as described, such a step-by-step education would be vital for Kim to develop the broad knowledge he will need to understand the policymaking process and the levers of influence at his disposal to impact that process.

Role of formal leadership bodies

The role of formal leadership bodies in North Korea is still being debated within the Pyongyang watching community. Under Kim Jong-il, the formal structure of leadership atrophied, giving way to informal lines of authority and communication. Toward the end of his life, Kim tried to resurrect this structure, especially within the Party, in order to give his heir an apparatus on which to base his rule. Kim Jong-un has utilized the formal leadership bodies in both the Party and state apparatus to facilitate decision-making. They give his decisions (as well as his rule) a sense of legitimacy within the wider North Korean leadership. Each leadership body plays a special role, which may or may not continue once Kim has consolidated his power.

- **Politburo:** The Politburo of the Workers' Party of Korea (officially the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea) is the highest leading body of the Workers' Party of Korea. Article 25 of Party Rules stipulates: "The Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee and its Presidium organize and direct all party work on behalf of the Party Central Committee between plenary meetings. The Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee shall meet at least once every month."²³² The Politburo is technically responsible for managing and coordinating the Party's political activities, as well as deliberating on current events and policies, between Central Committee plenums (which are technically supposed

²³² *Rules of the Workers' Party of Korea* (28 September 2010).

to be held every six months). According to the Party by-laws, the Politburo is required to meet once a month.²³³

At the time of this writing, there are a number of Politburo directives that have appeared in the North Korean media,²³⁴ but little evidence on how many times the body has actually met—some sources suggest it has met four times since Kim Jong-un took power.²³⁵ An examination of the media, as well as defector reporting, suggests that the Politburo currently performs a number of roles. It has a role in personnel management and announces Central Committee meetings. It is the mouthpiece through which official decisions are announced. That said, the Politburo is not a decision-making body. It will have deliberations on some issues that apparently inform Kim Jong-un's decision-making process. The Politburo also gives legitimacy to Kim Jong-un's rule by creating a venue through which the regime can demonstrate regularized procedures. Finally, it is a body composed of a number of elder statesmen, which is used to wield strong political influence throughout the nation and

²³³ As with other Communist regimes, North Korea uses the Party apparatus to give legitimacy to what is otherwise a leadership built on secretive, closed decision-making.

²³⁴ It was the Politburo that announced the appointment of Kim Jong-un as the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army on December 30, 2011, after an apparent meeting. It also adopted a "decision paper" on future policy that made clear the regime's continued pursuit of the Military First (*Songun*) policy and went on to proclaim through special breaking news in January 2012 that North Korea would preserve the body of Kim Jong-il "exactly as it is in a glass coffin in Kumsusan Memorial Palace." The Politburo on November 4, 2012, announced its decision to create the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission, headed by Jang Song-taek.

²³⁵ The only account of a Politburo meeting to date is the one that allegedly took place on July 15, 2012 (Sunday) where Ri Yong-ho was purged. There is no additional evidence to suggest that the Politburo meets regularly on any particular day. See "Top NK General Ousted For Debating Economic Reform," *Dong-A Ilbo Online*, 31 July 2012.

even within the inner circle of power—as may have been the case with the purge of Ri Yong-ho.²³⁶

- **National Defense Commission:** Under Kim Jong-il, the National Defense Commission became the leading state body. The 1998 constitution defined the NDC as “the highest guiding organ of the military and the managing organ of military matters.” Following Kim Jong-il’s stroke in 2008, an enhanced bureaucratic structure was created to support NDC operations, including a policy office and formal secretariat. While it apparently did not meet as a body, Kim Jong-il reached out to individuals on particular issues to inform his decision-making. He allegedly tasked members with responsibilities and oversight of particular policies. Therefore, the NDC was not so much a decision-making body as a venue through which policy execution was carried out. The parameters of this policy guidance were contained in Article 109 of the Constitution states, which outlines the NDC’s responsibilities:
 - Establish important policies of the state for carrying out the Military-First revolutionary line
 - Guide the overall armed forces and defense-building work of the state
 - Supervise the status of executing the orders of the Chairman of the DPRK NDC and the decisions and directives of the NDC, and establish relevant measures
 - Rescind the decisions and directives of state organs that run counter to the orders of the chairman of the NDC and to the decisions and directives of the NDC
 - Establish or abolish central organs of the national defense sector

²³⁶ According to one line of reporting, Ri Yong-ho was purged in the middle of a Politburo meeting when he argued against the June Economic Measures, which called for transferring many of the hard-currency operations from the military to the Cabinet. “Top NK General Ousted For Debating Economic Reform,” *op. cit.*

— Institute military titles and confer military titles above the general-grade officer rank.

Since Kim Jong-un has taken over as the First Chairman of the NDC, this organization seems to have faded somewhat into the background. It is a mouthpiece on certain issues, especially focused on inter-Korean relations, and is the source for announcements regarding tests of critical defense systems.²³⁷ As of this writing, there have been no reported meetings of the NDC.

- **Central Military Commission:** The KWP Central Military Commission has played a special role in the transfer of power to Kim Jong-un. At the Third Party Conference in 2010, the only leadership post Kim received was vice chairman of the CMC. According to the Party Charter, the Central Military Commission directs Party activity in the Korean People's Army and is chaired by the Party General Secretary.²³⁸ According to Section 27 of the KWP Charter, the CMC “discusses and decides” on the Party’s military policy and methods of its execution; organizes work to strengthen military industries, the people’s militia, and all armed forces; and directs the military establishment of the country. According to a KCNA report, a 25 August 2013 meeting of the CMC:

discussed and decided upon practical issues of bolstering up the combat capability of the revolutionary armed forces and increasing the defense capability of the country in every way as required by prevailing situation and the present conditions of the People’s Army.

²³⁷ The NDC released a statement in advance of the February 2013 nuclear test, a responsibility that fell to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the 2006 and 2009 tests. In June, the NDC took the lead in reconfirming North Korea’s nuclear status as part of an offer for high-level talks with the United States with the expressed purpose of creating a world free of nuclear weapons. “DPRK National Defense Commission Proposes ‘High-Level Talks’ with US,” KCNA, 16 June 2013.

²³⁸ When Kim Jong-un became First Secretary following Kim Jong-il’s death, he assumed the roles and responsibilities once reserved for the General Secretary.



Kim Jong-un conducting an expanded meeting of the KWP Central Military Commission in August 2013. According to the report that accompanied the photograph, Kim “made an important concluding speech which would serve as guidelines for firmly protecting the sovereignty and security of the country and promoting the cause of the Military-First (*Songun*) revolution of the party.” (Source: *Nodong Sinmun*, 26 August 2013)

According to some reporting, CMC and NDC decision-making is done at the same time in order to ensure that the “military follows the Party’s lead.”²³⁹ If this is the case, decision-making most likely does not take place within the CMC, but the CMC serves a coordination and facilitation role of decisions made higher up the chain of command. Its membership is composed of critical military and security leaders, thus ensuring that orders coming out under the CMC heading have maximum buy in across the country’s national security establishment.²⁴⁰ Like the NDC, it is not clear that the CMC meets on a regular basis.

²³⁹ Author’s interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

²⁴⁰ The CMC relies on a number of organizations to carry out its mandate, including the KPA General Political Department, the KWP Military Department, and the KWP Machine-Building [Military Industries] Department. The CMC also uses the KWP Civil Defense Department to transmit guidance and indoctrination of North Korea’s reserve military training units.

The only evidence of meetings to reach the outside world was the photographs in the North Korean media of expanded meetings in February and August (2013), both of which were chaired by Kim Jong-un.²⁴¹

Kim Jong-un's leadership style

Decision-making is not just about setting agendas and convening meetings. In North Korea's leader-centered system, the Supreme Leader's personality, demeanor, and leadership style impacts how decisions are made. It is a system that makes it difficult for regents and advisors to keep a leader focused on a set of issues or priorities. Policy can be made by the Supreme Leader's whim and ego and he can sidestep any formal processes that are in place to guide and inform his decision-making. In addition, since the regime depends on Supreme Leader input in order to function, his work ethic and attention to detail will have a dramatic impact on the efficiency of the policymaking process.

An often well-worn reframe from Pyongyang watchers and government officials is that the international community had developed a certain understanding of how Kim Jong-il operated. No matter how serious the crisis seemed on the surface, there was a sense that a pragmatic and calculating decision-maker was operating behind the scenes in Pyongyang. From what has been reported about Kim Jong-il's leadership style, this may have been the case on some occasions, but the reality is more complex. He was introverted and a solitary decision-maker. He relied on his own reading of official reports, the

²⁴¹ Photographs of the February meeting did not appear at the time. On 5 March, North Korean state media released a documentary film which focused on Kim Jong-un's interactions with the armed forces. Loosely translated as *Unleashing a New Heyday of the Formidable Forces of Mt. Paektu*, the 80-minute film consists mainly of footage that had previously appeared in short documentaries about Kim Jong-un's activities. Tacked on to these activities was footage of the CMC meeting of February 3, 2013. For a more detailed discussion of the meeting, including many screen shots, see *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 18 March 2013. As for the 25 August (Sunday) meeting, *Nodong Sinmun* carried photographs of the event. See *Nodong Sinmun*, 26 August 2013.

foreign press, and even the internet to inform his worldview.²⁴² He would hone these views through discussions with close advisors and by reaching out to key nodes within the regime apparatus. He was a micro-manager and obsessive about controlling information to ensure that his knowledge on issues extended beyond that of anyone else within the leadership.²⁴³ Kim preferred to run the regime through fear and competition. In this way, he kept other leaders off balance and beholden to him. Bribery, humiliation, and threats of punishments were often used techniques to keep the leadership in line. Defectors have also characterized Kim Jong-il as self-centered with no enduring commitment to principles other than his own self-interest.²⁴⁴ He would entertain the creative ideas of others as long as they did not clash with his opinions or threaten his position as Supreme Leader. In other words, Kim Jong-il was a leader who was very comfortable operating in a loose and informal system versus through formal bureaucratic channels. The consequences of this leadership style were:

- Self-assured decision-making even though subject to misinterpretation of the situation
- Delays in policymaking
- Extreme caution when it came to major departures from the established policy line

²⁴² Ken E. Gause, "The North Korean Leadership: System Dynamics and Fault Lines," in Kongdan Oh Hassig, ed., *North Korean Policy Elites* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, IDA Paper P-3903, June 2004).

²⁴³ This need for control stretched back to the 1970s, when he set up the Three Revolution Teams concept to give him unparalleled control and a channel of information collection independent of those used by Kim Il-sung.

²⁴⁴ Merrily Baird, "Kim Chong-il's Erratic Decision-making and North Korea's Strategic Culture," in Barry R. Schneider and Jerrold M. Post, eds., *Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, 2003).

- On occasion, conflicting and contradictory policies that emerged because the Supreme Leader did not realize he signed off on both.

While he has only been in power for less than two years, some information, albeit highly speculative, is beginning to emerge about Kim Jong-un's leadership style. The most obvious departure from the way his father operated is Kim Jong-un's open persona. He appears comfortable giving speeches (his father only gave one publicly recorded speech, which lasted 12 seconds) and interacting with large groups of ordinary citizens. This aspect of his leadership style harkens back to his grandfather, Kim Il-sung.²⁴⁵ Defector reporting also paints a picture of a young and impetuous Supreme Leader who is sometimes quick to make decisions without seeking advice.²⁴⁶ He is someone who apparently understands the awesome power of the position he holds, but also understands that there are constraints that the system imposes that are based on the edicts laid down by his father and grandfather. How eager he is to challenge some of these constraints is as yet unclear.²⁴⁷ His decision to reveal the failure of the Unha-3 missile test

²⁴⁵ The similarities between Kim Jong-un's and Kim Il-sung's public personae are so striking that many have suggested that Kim Jong-un is deliberately patterning his mannerisms after his grandfather in order to build a rapport with the people who look on the original *Suryong* with great fondness.

²⁴⁶ This could possibly explain his decision to have the Korean People's Army conduct the *Masikryong* Speed Battle, land reclamation project in Kangwon Province centered on the construction of a ski resort. On the surface, such a venture, allegedly designed to attract the tourist trade, appears to be the result of an impetuous and self-indulgent decision by Kim Jong-un. North Korea after all is facing international sanctions and its relations with the international community, including China, are at a low ebb. Some, however, have suggested that in the aftermath of the May (2013) reshuffle of the high command, such a speed battle is designed to show that the armed forces are acting as a leading edge in support of Kim's shifting focus to the economy. According to defector reporting, this was the first time that a personal appeal to workers from Kim Jong-un had been made public.

²⁴⁷ There is some debate within Pyongyang-watching circles over whether a cult of personality has begun inside North Korea. Some media reports have said that Kim Jong-un badges were spotted in Pyongyang in May (2013), worn by members of the elite. More recent reports suggest that this may not be the case. Sources at the border truce village of Panmun-

in April 2012 may have resulted from his own decision or could have resulted from the fact that he listened to those advisers who advocated transparency given the unprecedented openness leading up to the launch. Other reports describe Kim as a spontaneous decision-maker who is quick to anger. The story of Ri Yong-ho's ouster during a Politburo meeting fits this personality profile.



Kim Jong-un delivers his first public address in Kim Il-sung Square on the 100th anniversary of his grandfather's birth. (Source: KCTV)

At the time of this writing, there is an ongoing debate within Pyongyang watching circles over the extent to which Kim Jong-un is in control of his own public events. While many have speculated that he is stage managed, given his obvious mannerisms that appear to be patterned after his grandfather, a recent photograph suggests that he may write some of his own speeches. In June (2013), *Nodong Sinmun* published a photograph of Kim delivering a speech at an event in

jom have alleged that Kim Jong-un prohibited the production of such badges in consideration of his people. The South Korean delegation to the inter-Korean talks in July (2013) did not spot them on their North Korean counterparts. Instead, according to North Korean sources, the delegation wore pins featuring Kim Il-sung or both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un together—but no badges with only Kim Jong-un's face on them. See "Is Kim Jong-un Throttling Back Personality Cult?" *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 08 July 2013.

Chagang Province.²⁴⁸ The notes that Kim is speaking off of are written in blue ink and contain a number of amendments and deletions, which could suggest that this was not an officially generated speech, but one written by Kim himself.²⁴⁹ The fact that *Nodong Sinmun* did not reproduce the speech in its entirety, even though it was described as historic, has led some to believe that it may have been lacking in propaganda elements precisely because Kim Jong-un did write it. Conversely, others point out that it is impossible to say whether Kim really wrote it; rather, they suggest *Nodong Sinmun* was ordered to publicize an image showing the hand-written notes simply because it shows that Kim is a caring leader who strives to better connect with his people.²⁵⁰



Kim Jong-un delivering a speech in Chagang Province. (Source: *Nodong Sinmun*)

²⁴⁸ According to the article that accompanied the photograph, he delivered a “historic” speech after reviewing a performance by the Moran Hill Orchestra (aka Moranbong Band).

²⁴⁹ The KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department and the Central Committee secretary in charge of No. 1 events (those involving the leader) have traditionally drafted the leader’s speeches and then submitted them to him for approval. The speeches are normally typed. The fact that the Chagang speech both is handwritten and contains amendments (only the Supreme Leader would be able to make amendments to a No. 1 event speech) implies that Kim wrote it personally.

²⁵⁰ “Kim’s Hand-written Speech Sparks Debate,” *Daily NK*, 24 June 2013.

Assuming the role of Supreme Leader in all of its facets requires more than just acting on one's own initiative and making decisions. It also requires the leader to interact with the wider leadership. Very recent defector reporting suggests that Kim Jong-un is becoming increasingly comfortable in his role as Supreme Leader and dealing not only with his closest advisers, but with powerful institutions, such as the high command.²⁵¹ While he appears to be keenly aware of the protocols that need to be observed and to understand the boundaries within which he needs to operate in order to not endanger his position and by extension the stability of the regime, his policies indicate a bolder approach to dealing with the issues facing the regime, both internally and externally.²⁵² Some have suggested that his 15 April 2012 speech in which he promised the North Korean people that they would "no longer have to tighten their belts" was indicative of his willingness to move away from the Military First politics that characterized the regime under Kim Jong-il. Others point to the March/April crisis on the Korean Peninsula as evidence of a desire by Kim Jong-un and North Korea to push the limits on the international front. The unconditional abrogation of the Armistice Treaty went much further than any similar moves his father made.

As Kim Jong-un grows into his leadership role, it will likely become harder for his regents and advisers to control him from behind the scenes. This could result in a very different leadership style than is evident today, which is firmly tied to Kim's legitimacy building campaign. Once he is able to fully step into the shoes of the Supreme

²⁵¹ Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013. According to Radiopress, Japan's North Korean news-monitoring agency, state media have already run more than 100 reports on Kim Jong-un's activities in 2013 (as of June 24). In 2012, the number of stories on Kim's activities did not reach 100 until mid-August. Forty-eight of the 101 reports on Kim as of June 24 were related to the military.

²⁵² According to one theory reportedly emerging from sources inside North Korea, Kim Jong-un is at the mercy of factions around him. He "is merely an avatar of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, with no close associates of his own or real authority." Policymaking, therefore, depends on which faction comes out on top in the struggle to interpret Kim Jong-il's legacy. See "The Rise of Moderate and Hardline Factions in North Korea," *op.cit.*

Leader, his decision-making process may change and the character and direction of his policies may become less opaque. Whether the legacy that he stakes out for himself will ultimately result in a partial or complete departure from that of his father remains to be seen.



Unlike his father, Kim Jong-un does not appear to be shy around strangers. Here he is leading a tour of the renovated Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang in July 2013. (Source: *Nodong Sinmun*)

Policy execution

As the discussion moves from decision-making to policymaking, the debate within Pyongyang watching circles shifts from who is in charge to how the regime plans on addressing the challenges it faces both in the domestic and foreign policy/national security realms. There are some who contend that Kim Jong-un's regime is bold and willing to step away from the course laid down by his predecessors and embark on a fundamentally new path—be it reform-oriented or more hard-line. Others argue that regardless of Kim's own views, he and his advisors must, at least for the time being, adhere to the ideologically sanctioned courses of action. It is the view of this author that Kim Jong-un can tweak policies around the margins, but cannot challenge the underpinnings of the regime. He must adhere to the strictures laid out in Kim Jong-il's last will and testament regardless of the near term consequences.

In the following sections, this paper will examine North Korea's evolving set of domestic and national security policies, which at the Central Committee Plenum in March became intertwined in a new strategic line for simultaneous co-development of the country's nuclear program and economy—referred to as the “*byungjin*” line.²⁵³ Particular attention will be paid to what this new line says about the

²⁵³ The word “*byungjin*” actually means ‘progress in tandem’ or ‘move two things forward simultaneously.’ Presumably this new line is meant to make the population remember Kim Il-sung's own *byungjin* line in 1962, which called for co-development of the economy and national defense. The new line is, thus, “a brilliant succession and development onto a new, higher stage of the original line of simultaneously developing the economy and national defense that was set forth and had been fully embodied by the great Generalissimo.” In the aftermath of the March 2013 Central Committee Plenum, the North Korean media noted, “When the Party's new line is thoroughly carried out, [North Korea] will emerge as a great political, military and socialist economic power and a highly-civilized country which steers the era of independence.” It should be noted that while Kim Il-sung's *byungjin* line prioritized resources to the defense sector, Kim Jong-un's new line appears to be leaning toward developing the economy. See “*Byungjin* Lives as Kim Seeks Guns and Butter,” *The Daily NK*, 01 April 2013.

new regime's flexibility.²⁵⁴ Is Kim Jong-un capable of adopting a more pragmatic line of development or is he hostage to his own heritage and a system that is doomed to follow failed policies in a never ending pursuit of some unattainable state known as *Juche*?

Kim Jong-il's will and Kim Jong-un's policy parameters

In 2012, defector sources apparently were able to secure a copy (or copies) of Kim Jong-il's last will and testament,²⁵⁵ which he dictated to his sister and executor of the will, Kim Kyong-hui, in the months before his death.²⁵⁶ In the will, Kim Jong-il lays out a policy prescription for North Korea that is to be adhered to by his successor, Kim Jong-un. These prescriptions cover everything from internal Kim family relations to domestic and national security/foreign policy. If one assumes that Kim Jong-un must adhere closely to his father's will, at least until he consolidates his own power,²⁵⁷ this document can provide useful indicators and signposts for any Pyongyang watcher seek-

²⁵⁴ Both lines of development will proceed simultaneously and will be self-sufficient. It will be up to Party theoreticians to harmonize indirectly related sectors. On the surface, it appears as if the regime is trying to sidestep the longstanding and highly divisive internal debate over national priority: military improvement versus improvement in the people's living standard.

²⁵⁵ It should be stressed that, at the time of this writing, analysis of the various copies of the will is still underway and debate continues over whether they are authentic.

²⁵⁶ One source of Kim Jong-il's will is Lee Yun-keol, a high-profile North Korean defector and head of the NK Strategic Information Service Center, a Seoul-based think tank. See Lee Yun-keol, *The Contents of Kim Jong-il's Will: The Blueprint of Kim Jong-un's Regime and Possibility of Change* (Seoul: NKSIS, 2012). In April 2013, the author held interviews with NKSIS, as well as other defector sources, on various aspects of the will.

²⁵⁷ Some Pyongyang watchers would argue that Kim Jong-il's last will and testament is not so much a document that sets down commandments for Kim Jong-un to rule by, as a roadmap of the most likely successful course of action. If it is the latter, they go on to argue, Kim Jong-un is not bound to follow it religiously. However, this author believes that regardless of the nature of the last will and testament, it is not something that Kim Jong-un can easily deviate from as he is consolidating his power lest he risk undermining his legitimacy.

ing to map out the future of North Korean domestic and external policy.

- **Domestic Policy:** The will apparently says little about the plight of the average citizen in North Korea. Achieving a “strong and prosperous state” should be achieved through the development of nuclear power (for electricity), efficient fertilizer development (for agriculture), and combining the economic strength of the entire Korean Peninsula. North Korea should seek out strategies for improving relations with South Korea through political and economic exchanges. The ultimate goal is unification, but in the near term, North Korea should seek to leverage South Korea’s economic development by combining railroads, land and sea routes, and key industries, such as agriculture, light industry, and tourism. No mention is made of the role of markets and emphasis is put on the need for internal security, including enhancing the role of the internal security apparatus. Above all else, Kim Jong-il’s successor must ensure the continued dominance of the Kim family.
- **National Security/Foreign Policy:** Much of the will is focused on how North Korea should protect itself from external threats. Military First must remain at the center of the ruling doctrine in order to ensure that North Korea does not fall prey to larger powers. This means that the regime should continue to develop its critical defense systems—the nuclear and missile programs, as well as chemical and biological weapons. This is the only way in which North Korea can guarantee the peace on the Korean Peninsula. Unification must not come via war, which could undermine development, but through peaceful measures—presumably along lines set down by Pyongyang, although this was left unsaid in the will. After unification, Korea will be able to compete with the United States, Japan, and China, all of which currently conspire to keep the Korean Peninsula separated. To undermine this alliance, North Korea must work to disengage the United States from the peninsula and ensure that Chinese political and economic interference is kept in check. Japanese-North Korean differences should be resolved peacefully by merging discussions on past history (presumably Japanese atrocities during World War II) and the abduction issue. North Korea will ultimately prevail through the

retention of its nuclear program while developing its economic strength. As a consequence, the Six Party Talks should be used as a venue for gaining international acceptance of North Korea's status as a nuclear power and developing a process whereby international sanctions can be lifted.

These are the boundaries Kim Jong-il presumably established for Kim Jong-un to operate within over the next few years, if not longer. There is some latitude for interpretation and policymaking. It is within this space that policy debates probably reside at the moment—such as priorities within the policy arena. Whether Kim Jong-un will try to fundamentally step outside these boundaries in the future remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: to do so is the prerogative of the Supreme Leader and the Supreme Leader alone. The sections below discuss what has been observable so far in the Kim Jong-un era in the realms of domestic and national security/foreign policy.

North Korea's domestic strategy

On April 15, 2012, Kim Jong-un gave his first public speech on the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung. Amidst statements regarding a continued adherence to Military First, Kim noted that "It is the Party's steadfast determination to ensure that the people will never have to tighten their belt again, and make sure they enjoy the riches and affluence of socialism to their heart's content."²⁵⁸ This one statement set off a vigorous debate among Pyongyang watchers about whether the new regime was signaling plans to revisit an economic strategy akin to Kim Jong-il's 2002-2005 reform policies—a much-maligned effort to change resource allocations, redirecting at least some money, skilled manpower, and technology from the defense industries to the civilian economic sector.

The importance of this speech is that it was Kim Jong-un's inaugural announcement of his regime's philosophy to the North Korean people. It was an opportunity for him to lay down markers that will guide his regime into the future. As such, the message that the young lead-

²⁵⁸ "Full Text of Kim Jong-un's Speech for Kim Il-sung's 100th Birth Anniversary," Korean Central Broadcasting Station, 15 April 2012.

er seemed to be sending was that he was committed to ending chronic famine and vowing that North Korea would never have to revisit the troubles of the 1990s. The regime could no longer value the gun as the entire basis of its ruling philosophy, as Kim Jong-il did through Military First politics. Instead, the urgent task for the regime was to feed the people and figure out a way forward out of a stagnant economy. The only hint of a strategy for accomplishing this monumental task was the mention of needed changes to the agricultural and light industry sectors.

The debate about Kim Jong-un's domestic policy picked up steam at the end of May when *Nodong Sinmun* carried an article about the threat of "U.S. imperialism" and the need for military strength to defend against it.²⁵⁹ The article seemed to present a critique of the leadership's push for more attention to and resources for the civilian economy. It stated:

Reinforcing military power...is not as easy and simple as it sounds. Funds, as well as up-to-date technology, are necessary. The work of reinforcing military power cannot succeed without a firm determination and tightening one's belt. The Party and the people of countries waging the revolution have to reinforce their military power in spite of all difficulties.²⁶⁰

The passage contrasted sharply with concepts laid out in all three of Kim Jong-un's major announcements to that point, all of which defined the economy and improving people's lives as top priorities. The 30 May article fit with media behavior from 2002 to 2005, when the leadership allowed competing views about resource allocation and economic reform to surface in the media.²⁶¹ When the regime announced the so-called "June 28 Measures," which was followed the next month with the purge of Ri Yong-ho, ostensibly for criticizing Kim's new strategic focus, some Pyongyang watchers began to believe that some form of economic reform was in the offing. A close exami-

²⁵⁹ *Nodong Sinmun*, 30 May 2012.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ For a detailed account of the reforms of the 2002 to 2005 period, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Jong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change*, op. cit.

nation of the economic measures put forward so far under Kim Jong-un, however, suggest not so much an attempt at reform, but the institution of policies designed to make the rationing-based economic system work better. As one Pyongyang watcher noted, during the period of power consolidation, Kim Jong-un is constrained in his ability to embark on serious reform. What he is aiming at is economic improvement—a major difference with less political risk.²⁶²

The so-called “June 28 Measures” found their genesis in a 6 April (2012) statement Kim Jong-un made and was later reported in *Nodong Sinmun*, in which he committed the regime to finding a solution to the country’s chronic famine. Kim called for normalizing the supply of food and consumer goods to the North Korean people by increasing state investment to the agricultural and light industry sectors.²⁶³ In the agricultural sector, the regime allegedly has scrapped the old management system where the state took nearly all of the output and replaced it with a system where the state only takes 70 percent of the products, leaving 30 percent for the farmers. In addition, the farm work squads have been reduced from 10-25 to 4-6,²⁶⁴

²⁶² According to *Radio Free Asia*, the Korean Workers’ Party created an Economy Department in June 2013 to manage economic and finance policy. It is not clear whether the creation of this department resulted from the merger of several existing Central Committee departments. As part of its broad mandate for economic policy, this department, according to this report, allegedly controls the appointment of economic/finance personnel to the Cabinet and can create/abolish domestic and foreign trading corporations. The RFA report speculates that the genesis of the department can be found in the June 2012 Economic Policy Measures. If so, it could be the focal point for a new economic management system which places the Party back at the center of how the regime manages the economy. The head of the Economy Department is currently unknown.

²⁶³ Kim’s April 6 statement was carried in the April 19 edition of *Nodong Sinmun*.

²⁶⁴ The idea of work squads has raised comparisons with the Chinese agricultural reforms of the 1980s. Such comparisons are superficial, at best. The Chinese leadership abolished the cooperative farming system and replaced it with a Household Responsibility System. North Korea has imbedded its work squad concept in the cooperative farming system. North Korea’s reluctance to abolish the cooperative farming system is probably due in part to the serious pushback that accompanied the an-

meaning that the share per farmer (from the 30 percent) will be greater,²⁶⁵ thus theoretically enhancing the incentive for farmers to grow more produce resulting in an overall increase in the country's agricultural output.²⁶⁶

As for the light industry sector, the regime appears to be focusing on shifting the economic management system in some enterprises from a rationing system to a wage-based system. State investment will be made upfront to defer initial production costs to help plants and enterprises purchase raw materials and operate their facilities. The profits these enterprises generate will be divided between the state and the companies. This strategy is designed to normalize production and, by replacing the rationing system with a wage system, encourage workers to work harder.²⁶⁷ But it should be noted, that these reforms are only aimed at enterprises run under a self-supporting accounting system—in other words, only approximately 10 percent of North Ko-

nouncement of the June Measures. Party-state entities, which have traditionally controlled the distribution of food, feared that if the system were abolished, it would undermine their influence and privileges. Whether the work squad concept is a step along the path to real agricultural reform or an end in itself remains to be seen. See Park Hyeong-jung, *One Year into the '6.28 Policy Directives,'* op. cit.

²⁶⁵ Downsizing the work squads at cooperative and state farms could lead to a revolutionary change in the North Korean principle of collective farming and could give rise to private farming. See Cho Min, "The New Economic Policies in North Korea Under the Leadership of Kim Jong-un," *Vantage Point* 36, no. 5 (May 2013).

²⁶⁶ According to the United Nations, North Korea is expected to produce 1.7 million tons of rice in 2013, compared to 1.8 million tons in 2012. This represents a 5.6-percent drop in rice production.

²⁶⁷ According to one study, there has been a paradigm shift in how state enterprises conduct their business. In the past, state-owned enterprises could only carry out state-planned orders. Now, allegedly, they react not only to state-planned directives but to market activities, as well. This could signal the move from a "socialist planned economy" to an "unplanned socialist economy." According to one source, this activity takes place under the guidance of the Cabinet. See *Chosun Sinbo*, 10 May 2013, and Park Hyeong-jung, *One Year into the '6.28 Policy Directives,'* op. cit.

rea's industrial concerns.²⁶⁸ Large "central enterprises," such as munitions plants will continue to be run under a state strategic plan and adhere to the rationing system.²⁶⁹

Pak Pong-ju's appointment as Premier at the SPA meeting in April 2013 led many Pyongyang watchers to speculate that Kim Jong-un planned to revisit the reform measures taken by his father in the early 2000s. However, that does not appear to be the case for now. When examined, the "June 28 Measures" do not appear to constitute a scrapping of the command economy in favor of market-based economic reforms. This would not be in keeping with the *Suryong* system, which is predicated on a top-down driven economic (and political) system. Instead, the new economic management system in both the agricultural and light industry sectors is designed to improve productivity, which is needed to reinvigorate the moribund command economy. The regime's economic strategy, therefore, is not about opening up to the international community, but creating a firm base by which the existing rationing-based economy can remain stable.²⁷⁰ As such, when Kim Jong-un talked about "feeding the people," he is likely referring to those preferred classes of the *Songbun*, the beneficiaries of the current economic model—military, elite in Pyongyang, skilled workers in the military industrial complex, the growing middle class, and Party and government officials. The rest of the population will have to make due and rely on the market. Viewed from this perspective, North Korea's economic revival is not based on large scale re-vamping of the system, but tweaking around the edges. And for it to

²⁶⁸ Cho Min, "The New Economic Policies in North Korea Under the Leadership of Kim Jong-un," op. cit.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Compare this to China's economic experiment in the 1980s and early 1990s when it relied on more fundamental reforms (i.e., reducing state control and leveraging the markets) and assistance from neighboring countries that exponentially expanded the influx of foreign capital and technology. This laid the foundation for economic growth, which in turn provided the Communist Party with the political and physical capacity to deal with the internal resistance that the reforms generated. Because of the lack of indigenous resources and outside support, it is hard to see how North Korea can sustain its current economic measures as currently conceived.

succeed, North Korea will have to reach out to the international community to secure additional assistance.

North Korea's national security and foreign policy strategy

Unlike its domestic strategy, North Korea's national security and foreign policy strategy lacks a touch stone policy statement such as the "June 28 Measures." It is less codified and more based on the regime's goal of ensuring North Korea's survival as a recognized nuclear power. Over the last few years, the underpinnings of this survival strategy have solidified to the point that the strategy could ironically undermine the very goal that it is supposed to promote.

Pyongyang has resorted to a number of diplomatic and military strategies to promote its foreign and national security interests. In order to understand the underpinnings of how the North Korean leadership views its relations with the outside world, it is necessary to look beyond the Kim Jong-un era. The underpinnings are rooted in a philosophy with ties back to Kim Il-sung's struggle against the Japanese occupation of Korea. This period of defeat and subjugation by a larger enemy shaped Kim and the first generation of North Korean leaders' political attitudes and threat perceptions. Internally, this took the form of complete societal reconstruction to eliminate any challenges to the absolute rule of the Kim family.²⁷¹ Over time, this process increasingly isolated North Korea not only from the international community, but from its own communist patrons (Soviet Union and China).

In order to limit the influence of the outside world into internal North Korean affairs, as well as help the regime cope with its isolation, Kim Il-sung developed the *Juche* ideology as a framework through which to run the regime. The *Juche* ideology borrowed from Marxism-Leninism, as well as the North Korean experience, to craft an approach to domestic and foreign policy that eschews the reliance on larger powers and interprets the actions of the international community with suspicion. The ideology also espouses an ethnocen-

²⁷¹ For a detailed discussion of how this process unfolded, see Ken E. Gause, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*, op. cit.

tric nationalism designed to pacify the population and make it fearful of foreign influence, which is deemed “cultural poison.” At a policy execution level, *Juche* is composed of three components that provide the boundaries for dealing with the outside world.

- “Political Independence” (*Chaju*): This slogan focuses on the inherent sovereignty of North Korea, something that must be respected by the international community. It touts the need that no state should interfere in the internal affairs of another. This highlights a fear North Korea has with regard to its relations with South Korea, especially in periods where Pyongyang is feeling vulnerable, such as during a power transition process.
- “Economic Self Sufficiency” (*Charip*): This slogan refers to North Korea’s ability, through its command economy, to provide for its own survival. Born during the guerrilla movement of the 1930s and 1940s, this part of the *Juche* ideology was reinforced with the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of North Korea’s communist support network. During the Kim Jong-il era, exceptions were made within *Charip* to allow for international assistance to keep the regime from collapsing under the weight of the humanitarian crisis of the 1990s. Much of Pyongyang’s foreign policy of the 2000s was based on pressuring and enticing (often via its burgeoning nuclear program) the international community to provide aid in blatant violation of the North’s philosophy of *Juche*. But, at the same time, North Korea has pushed back hard against what it considers economic blackmail from the United States and South Korea, both of which have offered aid in return for North Korea giving up its “nuclear deterrent.”
- “Defense Self Sufficiency” (*Chawi*): *Chawi* lies at the heart of *Juche* and traces its roots back to the early 1960s when Kim Il-sung created the tenets of the Military First Policy, which became the center of the ruling doctrine under Kim Jong-il in the mid-1990s. It requires that the regime be prepared to provide for its own defense through the maintenance of a robust military-industrial base. Since the 1990s, the concept of a viable deterrent has also come to be attached to *Chawi*, which in recent years has not only referred to a conventional, but also a nuclear, capability. Shortly after Kim Jong-il’s death, the idea of

North Korea as a “nuclear state” was inserted into the North Korean constitution.²⁷²

The North Korean leadership has relied on *Juche* and its concepts to provide the drivers and boundaries of its foreign and national security policy. In its relationship with South Korea, Pyongyang takes steps to protect its political sovereignty, while exploring avenues for aid. Since the 1990s, the use of provocations, both violent and non-violent, have become integral to North Korea’s brinkmanship strategy to both keep Seoul politically off balance, while economically engaged. After the sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, this calculus became harder as South Korea stopped much of its aid and ceased diplomatic relations with the North.

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has explored ways to reinvigorate its relationship with South Korea. During the March/April 2013 crisis, Pyongyang tried to establish the boundaries for the inter-Korean relationship through a strategy of intimidation, concluding with the shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.²⁷³ But as it has shifted

²⁷² In May 2012, the SPA inserted language into the constitution declaring North Korea a nuclear weapons state. See “DPRK Website Posts Full Text of 2012 Revised DPRK Constitution,” *Naenara* Website, 30 May 2012. On 1 April 2013, the SPA passed the “Law on Consolidating the Position of the Nuclear Weapons State,” which placed nuclear weapons at the center of the Kim Jong-un regime. See “DPRK Adopts Law on Consolidating the Position of the Nuclear Weapons State,” *KCNA*, 01 April 2013.

²⁷³ There is a great deal of debate within Pyongyang-watching circles about why North Korea walked away from a joint venture that was bringing needed hard currency into the regime. Some argue that it was something Pyongyang had wanted to do for quite some time because of the regime’s fears of foreign views and influence seeping into the regime. Others argue that it was only a temporary tactic designed to fundamentally reorient the inter-Korean relationship. According to one Pyongyang watcher, the move could have been taken by Pyongyang in order to ensure that in the future Seoul could not unilaterally walk away from inter-Korean joint ventures, regardless of North Korean behavior, without being painted as the villain. This could only be done if the KIC was closed down and reopened as part of an inter-Korean dialogue that binds both sides to an agreement that neither side will unilaterally undermine the joint ventures. Given the losses already incurred by South Korean business firms, Seoul has already been calling for enhanced language to an

to diplomacy as its leading strategy, Pyongyang has been eager to engage Seoul in dialogues on a variety of fronts, including on the Kaesong Industrial Complex.²⁷⁴ This appears to be directly in line with the tenets laid out in Kim Jong-il's will which stressed the need to leverage South Korea's standing in the international community and its position as a leading player in the global economy as a possible wedge to end North Korea's international isolation and as a catapult for the North Korean moribund economy.²⁷⁵

There is no country North Korea fears more than the United States. The United States led the UN forces against North Korea during the Korean War. The United States provides the backbone to the security of South Korea, including an extended nuclear umbrella. As long as U.S. forces remain on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea will feel under immediate threat. It is this paranoia that has driven much of North Korea's decision-making on national security for over 60 years. It is at the heart of the calculus by the regime to seek a nuclear capability. In terms of policy execution, Kim Jong-il and now Kim Jong-un have sought a comprehensive peace treaty that will replace the Armistice agreement that ended the Korean War. Only with the security guarantees that come with such a treaty will North Korea begin to feel secure. Unlike the United States and South Korea, North Korea holds the experience of the Korean War very close to its national psyche. For its leadership, the war has never ended and for that reason, the regime can never let down its guard.

existing agreement between the two sides guaranteeing the safety of South Korean investment and personnel not only at Kaesong but also at the Mt. Kumgang resort—something North Korea has simply ignored whenever tensions mount. According to this Pyongyang watcher, North Korea could follow such an agreement with a provocation in order to test Seoul's commitment to the new deal. See Alexandre Mansourov, "North Korea: Enduring Short-Term Pain for Long-Term Gain," 38 *North*, 12 July 2013.

²⁷⁴ Just as this paper was going to print in August 2013, North and South Korea issued a joint statement on terms for resuming operations at the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

²⁷⁵ Alexandre Mansourov, "North Korea: Enduring Short-Term Pain for Long-Term Gain," op. cit.

That said, North Korea has apparently not pursued the peace treaty and security guarantees with the commitment some would expect if the regime was serious about this being a long term goal. The reason for this is hard to explain but could be tied to an equally important near term need for an outside enemy (namely the United States) in order to promote internal regime cohesion. Pyongyang is comfortable in its role as the pariah nation and the victim of international conspiracies. This provides the Supreme Leader with latitude to act according to his own calculus unencumbered by the need to consider the equities of potential international partners. How to institute a set of policies that navigates North Korea towards a path of engagement and the security guarantees it says it wants will be a challenge for Kim Jong-un.

For North Korea, China has always been a dilemma. On the one hand, Beijing has since the end of the Cold War been North Korea's most dominant patron and protector within the United Nations. It has protected North Korea from the slings and arrows of international condemnation and its aid has kept the regime from economic calamity which could lead to instability—some would say that China has only done enough to keep North Korea “on life support.” On the other hand, China has at times tried to influence the North Korean leadership to adopt policies that are more in keeping with a responsible member of the international community. It has pressured Pyongyang to attend the Six Party Talks aimed at eliminating its nuclear program. It has counseled Pyongyang to follow the Chinese economic model for development. A reading of the North Korean media has made it clear that at times Pyongyang has resented this intrusion into what it considers its sovereign policymaking. In addition, over the last decade, China has become a major partner in a number of economic deals along the common border, be it in North Korea's special economic zones or its rich mineral and mining concerns. For these reasons, the Kim regime has paid particular attention to its relationship with China. When Kim Jong-il became the heir apparent, he traveled to China to meet with the leadership in Beijing. After he became the Supreme Leader, he continued his father's policy of maintaining the relationship with China at the senior leader level and within the Party-to-Party domain—a unique framework which emphasized the importance of the relationship to North Korea's surviv-

al. At the time of this writing, Kim Jong-un has yet to travel to Beijing and has only held two meetings with a leading Chinese officials.²⁷⁶

A cursory examination of Kim Jong-un's first year in power would suggest that he is adhering to the boundaries laid out in his father's will. At the operational level, however, he seems to be taking an even bolder approach to dealing with the outside world than Kim Jong-il, putting forth a policy line that is more unconditional and less open to compromise while still trying to achieve breakthroughs.

- On the nuclear issue, North Korea appears to have shut the door on any negotiation on its nuclear program by declaring itself a nuclear state. Unlike during the Kim Jong-il regime when the nuclear program appeared to be both a deterrent and a diplomatic tool, under Kim Jong-un, the regime has on numerous occasions voiced its resolution not to even place its “nuclear deterrent” up for discussion unless it is in the context of Korean Peninsula-wide denuclearization—code for securing a peace treaty with the United States and the withdrawal of the U.S. extended deterrent to South Korea.²⁷⁷ The decision to tie the nuclear program to Kim Jong-un's name with the announcement of the “*byungjin*” line appears to have backed North Korea into a corner, leaving no space for diplomacy. This is in keeping with Kim Jong-il's will regarding the sanctity of the nuclear program, but it highlights an inherent contradiction in the will, which also stresses the need for peaceful resolution of North Korea's issues with the international community.

²⁷⁶ In November 2012, Kim Jong-un met with Li Jianguo, a member of the Communist Party of China's [CPC] Political Bureau. At this meeting, Li passed a letter to Kim from the new CPC general secretary, Xi Jinping. In July 2013, Kim met with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao, who arrived in Pyongyang to participate in events commemorating the 60th anniversary of the end of active hostilities of the Fatherland Liberation War (Korean War).

²⁷⁷ Unlike its predecessors, the Kim Jong-un regime describes its possession of nuclear weapons as “self-defensive” and necessary in order to achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. This latter point of describing its nuclear capability as *necessary* to achieve denuclearization is an argument that Pyongyang never made under Kim Jong-il. Instead, North Korea claimed it would need a nuclear deterrent *until* denuclearization had been achieved on the peninsula.

- The character of the Kim Jong-un regime and how it plans to deal with the United States and South Korea was on full display in March and April 2013 when North Korea manufactured a crisis on the Korean Peninsula in an effort to fundamentally restructure its relations with both countries. In a move that Kim Jong-il only flirted with, Kim Jong-un, through the Supreme Command, unconditionally abrogated the Armistice Treaty. This was followed by two months of tit-for-tat ratcheting up of tensions in response to various activities associated with the annual joint Foal Eagle/Key Resolve exercises carried out by U.S. and South Korean forces. Toward the end of the crisis, North Korea shut down the Kaesong Industrial Park, which had been at the center of the inter-Korean relationship and was the crown jewel in Kim Jong-il's policy toward the South. Pyongyang was unambiguous in signaling that it wanted a peace treaty and security guarantees from the United States to bring to the Korean War to a formal end.²⁷⁸ It also, apparently, wanted to make clear to both Seoul and Washington that North Korea was not resorting to its well-worn brinkmanship strategy in exchange for aid, but wanted a fundamentally new relationship. The United States and its allies could deal with North Korea as an equal (read nuclear power), which included removing existing UN sanctions against the regime, or it would suffer unending tension and peril on the peninsula. According to the North Korea line, it had not brought about this crisis. The international community had. In the months since the crisis, North Korea has engaged in an unsuccessful diplomatic outreach campaign with both South Korea and the United States. In a rare "National Defense Commission statement," Pyongyang expressed its willingness to engage at the highest level "to establish peace and security in the region." This is in keeping with Kim Jong-il's will—North Korea should not shy away from engaging its enemies, but only from a position of strength (i.e., without foreign preconditions and on Pyongyang's terms).

²⁷⁸ Some Pyongyang watchers suggested that North Korea's unconditional and unambiguous signaling campaign was symptomatic of the bolder policy approach by Kim Jong-un. Others suggested that the new leader had to act in such a bold fashion since he was trying to build his leadership credentials within the regime.

- The big question mark and the source of most concern in Pyongyang's foreign and security policy is China. Within the economic realm, China is North Korea's greatest patron and is playing an increasing role in its border industries and in the developing special economic zones designed to bring desperately needed hard currency into the regime. Within the political and security realms, however, Beijing seems to be recalibrating its North Korea policy. In the lead up to the April 2012 missile launch, China warned its neighbor about violations of existing UN sanctions. It repeated these arguments in December in the lead up to North Korea's next missile launch. Within the United Nations, China no longer acted as the obstructionist party to heavy sanctions, as it did in 2010 following the sinking of the *Cheonan*. In the aftermath of the March-April crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Kim Jong-un sent a special envoy (Choe Ryong-hae) to Beijing to assess the damage done to the bilateral relationship and plead that China recognize North Korea as a nuclear power. The Chinese leadership, including Xi Jinping, refused to recognize this request and instead urged North Korea to return to international talks (presumably the Six Party Talks) and seek a path to denuclearization. The lack of another patron has put Pyongyang in a difficult situation. It cannot easily dismiss Beijing's guidance and, as a consequence, has had to appear to be taking steps to engage with South Korea and the United States while not directly offering up its nuclear program in exchange. Kim Jong-il's will was apparently clear that North Korea must maintain a good relationship with China, but be wary that Beijing's national interest does not always match Pyongyang's. Going forward, maintaining this balancing act while not becoming China's pawn may be the most critical and difficult task for the Kim Jong-un regime.

North Korea's insistence of retaining its nuclear deterrent is the key to understanding Kim Jong-un's policy agenda behind the *byungjin* line. In 1962, Kim Il-sung proposed a strategy of balanced development of the economy and the military by transferring resources from the economy to support the military. Kim Jong-il doubled down on this strategy through the Military First policy to the point that the economic sector began to wither. Kim Jong-un seems to have returned to some semblance of a balanced strategy, but in the opposite direction. The nuclear deterrent in the future may allow North Korea

to reduce defense spending on conventional weapons and shift resources to the economy. As a consequence, this delicate house of cards depends on North Korea retaining its nuclear deterrent.

From a policy perspective, the regime has left itself few options. It can continue along its absolutist path. It can attempt to slow roll the international community in an attempt to secure economic assistance. Or it can return to provocations and belligerence to bully its neighbors in the hopes of changing minds in Washington, Seoul, and Beijing. This raises the question of red lines beyond which the regime will not stray in order to secure its near term future. The time may be fastly approaching when Kim Jong-un will have to provide strategic guidance that goes beyond Kim Jong-il's last will and testament. This is not only an issue of policy, but of power. What are the implications for regime stability if Pyongyang has to stray beyond the boundaries laid down by Kim Jong-il before Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power?

Regime redlines regarding policy: Where does the regime go from here?

One and a half years in and the Pyongyang watching community still does not have a good handle on the ultimate policy line (both domestically and externally) the Kim Jong-un regime will follow. Some argue that the actions over the last several months mean that the regime has not changed its ways and Kim Jong-un will continue the policies pursued by his father, alternating between crisis management and diplomacy to secure what aid it can from the international community. Others believe that at his core, Kim Jong-un, who has experienced the outside world and is of a different generation, will ultimately pursue reform, albeit limited and with North Korean characteristics. Still others believe that the system is fatally flawed and Kim Jong-un can do nothing more than muddle through and try to stave off collapse—a course that could lead to policymaking that wavers wildly from experimenting with reforms to hardline brinksmanship.

This paper argues that the answer to this question—Where does the regime go from here?—cannot be definitively answered until Kim Jong-un has finished consolidating his power, something that could

take at least another year or two and at most another five years.²⁷⁹ In the meantime, the tenor and gist of Kim's policies can shift given internal and external pressures, as well as the requirements for the power consolidation process. As such, this section will focus on the red lines that are likely to inform Kim's thinking as he seeks to operationalize his policies. Ultimately, the regime wants to survive and in order to not risk instability, it must navigate within set boundaries that go beyond just Kim Jong-il's will and include consideration of the consequences of policies—how they impact legitimacy within the regime, how they reflect positively on Kim Jong-un as a leader, and how they impact North Korea's external relations (especially with China). Policy missteps on any of these fronts could unleash forces that threaten the stability of the regime and bring about the collapse that has been predicted for years.

North Korea will explore changes to its economy, but only around the margins. Kim Jong-un will likely remain cautious in his approach to the economy. As noted above, the regime is currently willing to examine changes to policies related to agriculture and light industry, but only in the context of preserving the command economy. Kim apparently supported the transfer of several hard currency endeavors from the military to the Cabinet, which apparently led to blow back in the wake of the purge of Ri Yong-ho. Moving too quickly on reforms that could call the Military First policy into question could be dangerous and potentially make Kim's path to consolidation more problematic.²⁸⁰ As such, this should be considered a red line, at least for the

²⁷⁹ This time span is based on an assessment of views throughout the Pyongyang-watching community of those who do not subscribe to the notion that Kim Jong-un has already consolidated his power. This paper argues that a leader has "consolidated his power" when he is the sole decision-maker; is recognized by the entire leadership that he is the leader without question; relies on advisors for advice, not guidance; has a detailed understanding of how the regime operates and where the pressure points exist; and has developed ties and relationships throughout the regime to ensure that his policies are followed and, if they are not, the levers of power to exact punishment.

²⁸⁰ Following the August meeting of the KWP Central Military Commission, the North Korean media began to tout the Military First policy, but this was done in the context of armed forces being in the service of the Party and the Leader. According to one article: "The most important guaran-

near term until Kim Jong-un is in a stronger position vis-à-vis the military. In the more distant future, however, it is possible that Kim will not be satisfied with just tinkering with the economy to squeeze out limited improvements, but may embark on more significant reform akin to what his father attempted in the early 2000s. After all, he did go well beyond Kim Jong-il's will in his first speech in which he promised the North Korean people that they will no longer have to "tighten their belts." Some Pyongyang watchers go even further in arguing that North Korea is already following the Chinese model of reform—securing a nuclear deterrent in order to ensure the regime's security, which allows for eventual economic reform on a significant scale, a policy package that could take decades to carry off.²⁸¹

North Korea will not part with its nuclear deterrent. North Korea declared that it possessed nuclear weapons in 2005. The regime insisted that it would maintain this capability in order to deter the threats from the United States and enhance its self-defense capability. By the time Kim Jong-il died, the nuclear program had become part of his legacy—his only real shining achievement as a Supreme Leader. As noted above, preservation and enhancement of the nuclear program was one of the leading commandments he passed on to Kim Jong-un in his last will and testament. For this reason alone, Kim is obligated to continue the program and to do otherwise would violate a red line that would not only undermine his legitimacy as Supreme Leader, but could threaten his political survival. Kim Jong-un's repeated emphasis on North Korea's achievement of nuclear power status (something now codified in the constitution) can be interpreted as an

tee for the victory of the revolution is to strengthen the party, which serves as the general staff of the revolution, and strongly consolidate the driving force of the revolution by uniting the army and people as one around the party." See "Respected and Beloved Comrade Kim Jong Un's Talk 'Let Us Eternally Glorify Comrade Kim Jong Il's Great Idea and Achievements of the Military-First Revolution'," *Nodong Sinmun*, 25 August 2013. This suggests that if Kim is slowly moving away from *Songun* as the centerpiece of the regime's ideology, he is doing it very carefully in order to not antagonize the military in the process. For a detailed examination of this article, see Stephen Haggard, "Kim Jong Un's Songun Lecture," *North Korea: Witness to Transformation*, 10 September 2013.

²⁸¹ John Delury, "Pyongyang Perseveres," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (July/August 2013).

effort to stabilize his power base as early as possible.²⁸² The military, and arguably the larger regime, views the nuclear program not only as a means of self-defense in a world where it can no longer rely on patrons, but also as a source of pride and prestige. In the near term as he consolidates his power, Kim cannot show any wavering on the nuclear program. By taking an absolute stance on refusing to discuss unilateral denuclearization, the regime has formulated a bottom-line calculus—denuclearization = regime collapse—that will likely persist for the foreseeable future. For the more distant future, the Kim regime has provided what it considers a way forward: phased-arms reduction and eventual denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in keeping with Kim Il-sung's wishes.

North Korea wants diplomatic relations with South Korea and the United States, but on a fundamentally different level. Kim Jong-il's will makes it clear that North Korea can secure its future prosperity only through reaching accommodation with South Korea and replacing the Armistice Treaty with a peace treaty and bringing to an end the Korean War. In the summer of 2013, following the two-month crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the Kim Jong-un regime shifted to a diplomatic campaign aimed at Seoul and Washington.²⁸³ But on both counts, the North Korean initiative failed because it ran into a red line—both Seoul and Washington insisted that Pyongyang must put its nuclear program on the table as a precondition for substantive discussions. From North Korea's perspective, this is a non-starter. Pyongyang has made it clear that it wants a fundamentally different relationship with Seoul and Washington than it had in the past when

²⁸² Pyongyang has outlined a foreign policy approach with regard to its nuclear program that stresses its irreversible nature while attempting to reassure the international community of North Korea's ability to be a responsible and rational actor when it comes to its nuclear deterrent.

²⁸³ According to one defector who used to work for the KWP United Front Department, North Korean diplomacy under Kim Jong-il had three tenets: (1) pay no attention to South Korea; (2) exploit Japan's emotions; and (3) ply the United States with lies, but make sure they are logical ones. See "Japan's Iijima Visits North Korea: How to Read It," *New Focus International*, 27 May 2013. If Kim Jong-il's will is to be believed, this strategy may have changed in that Pyongyang must now pay attention to Seoul.

its nuclear program could be a source of negotiation.²⁸⁴ No longer is North Korea looking for short-term aid. Instead, it wants to be treated as a nuclear power and it wants to negotiate on the issue of security on the peninsula in a way that concludes with a peace treaty. At the time of this writing, North Korea is feeling pressure from China to return to the Six-Party Talks and it has little hope of finding sustained diplomatic traction with South Korea and the United States, although it appears to have reached an agreement with Seoul to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex.²⁸⁵

North Korea will continue to listen to China, but Beijing's influence will remain limited. The Sino-North Korean relationship was at one point described as being as close as “lips and teeth.” For more than 60 years, this has been a special relationship—not one of state to state, but one of Party to Party and Leader to Leader. When Kim Jong-il was made heir apparent in the 1980s, his first trip abroad was to China to meet with Deng Xiaoping and the senior leadership. It was a test for the future North Korean leader and a chance for him to develop the critical relationships necessary to handle peninsula affairs and understand Beijing's equities in the region. As time passed, Kim traveled to China to provide context to his Chinese patrons on North Korea's summits with other regional leaders or, more recently, context regarding crises on the Korean Peninsula, such as the sinking of *Cheonan*.

²⁸⁴ As long as North Korea keeps the outside world at arm's length, it can avoid having to make decisions that could impact fundamental regime equities. For this reason, Pyongyang's apparent foreign policy strategy has a near-term inherent contradiction: by trying to forge a fundamentally new relationship with South Korea and the United States, Kim Jong-un risks his own legitimacy because he will be forced to make decisions that press the boundaries of existing guidance.

²⁸⁵ It is highly unlikely that North Korea will agree to return to the Six-Party Talks in the near future. If it does, that would suggest that the regime is desperate and that Kim has no option but to at least discuss the nuclear issue in the hopes of securing aid. A more likely option is an inter-Korean dialog. The Park administration may use Trustpolitik to explore soft issues in order to build up trust before moving to more core issues. If so, Seoul may be willing to temporarily suspend its precondition of denuclearization in order to open up channels of communication. Author's discussions with South Korean government officials, May 2013.

Since Kim Jong-il's death, Sino-North Korean relations have taken a turn for the worse. Kim Jong-un ignored repeated Chinese pleas to not conduct missile or nuclear tests. Following the March/April crisis, Kim sent his envoy, Choe Ryong-hae, to Beijing to assess the damage to the relationship. Choe reportedly asked Xi Jinping to recognize North Korea's status as a nuclear power. The Chinese president ignored the request and insisted that North Korea must comply with UN sanctions. He also urged North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks.

Choe's visit has put North Korea in a difficult position since the North Korean leadership cannot ignore the requests of its major benefactor. In the past, this would be the point at which Kim Jong-il would make a personal visit to Beijing. Since his death, the Leader to Leader channel has ceased to exist. Kim Jong-un has yet to travel to China and probably will not do so in a period of tensions between the two countries. His advisors will not allow him to be lectured to by a frustrated Chinese leadership that is highly skeptical of the young leader's qualifications to be Supreme Leader. As a consequence, following Choe's visit, Pyongyang sent another delegation, led by First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan, to Beijing, to examine ways forward regarding Xi's request to return to the Six-Party Talks. Kim Jong-un and his advisers seem to have been caught off guard by Beijing's willingness to increase the pressure on Pyongyang while continuing to support the international community with regard to existing sanctions.²⁸⁶ While relations may be warming in the aftermath of Vice President Li Yuanchao's visit to North Korea in July (2013) in which he met Kim Jong-un, questions remain. Can Pyongyang honor Beijing's request while not stepping over its own internal red line of not abandoning its nuclear program? This will be a source of frustration for the North Korean leadership, and the way it handles

²⁸⁶ According to a former U.S. ambassador with high-level contacts in Beijing, the Chinese leadership's decision to increase the pressure on North Korea was based on an assessment that the power transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un had gone smoothly and the regime was stable. This assessment was bolstered by Kim Jong-un's ability to move or remove key figures within the regime (e.g., Ri Yong-ho) without destabilizing the regime. It is unclear, however, what indicators Beijing would rely on to recalibrate its North Korea policy.

this frustration will most likely dictate the near-term course of Sino-North Korean relations.



Kim Jong-un meets with Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao during the latter's visit to Pyongyang in July 2013. (Source: *Nodong Sinmun*)

North Korea will likely continue to engage in provocations, but it does not want war. For nearly two decades, North Korea has used provocations in support of a brinkmanship strategy as a central component of its foreign policy. Pyongyang has used provocations to underline its contempt for certain international boundaries (namely, the Northern Limit Line); to test new administrations in Seoul; to lay the foundation for follow-on diplomatic negotiations with the United States and South Korea; and, internally, to create cohesion around the regime in times of political turmoil, such as occurs during the transition of power. These provocations have been overt and covert and have taken several forms: the testing of major defense systems (missile/nuclear programs), non-violent demonstrations (cyber and GPS attacks), and violent attacks (sinking a South Korean ship and shelling a South Korean island).²⁸⁷ In March/April, North Korea self-

²⁸⁷ For a detailed discussion of North Korean calculus regarding provocations and escalation, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Calculus in the Mari-*

manufactured a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The path to this crisis began with North Korean missile and nuclear tests, followed by UN sanctions. The crisis had the earmarks of a planned event, designed to test the new Park administration and look for potential wedges between Seoul and Washington. Pyongyang's operational strategy for conducting the crisis seemed to be tied to Kim Jong-un's efforts to build legitimacy as a bold new military leader who is willing to stand up to North Korea's perceived enemies. As such, North Korea's actions were unconditional and the regime seemed willing (at least in the beginning) to move up the escalatory ladder as a matter of principle instead of looking for available "off ramps." In the months and years to come, many expect that Kim Jong-un will not shy away from future provocations designed to fundamentally reshape North Korea's relationship with South Korea and the United States. This assumes that Pyongyang will not be willing to engage under the preconditions set down by both Seoul and Washington and that provocations will be the tool of choice to try to force recognition of its nuclear program.

A lesson learned from previous provocations, however, is that North Korea does not want war and has always taken measures to control escalation.²⁸⁸ On the eve of the March/April crisis, Kim Jong-un made it clear (in a discussion with Dennis Rodman) that he also did not want war. It remains to be seen whether this comment to an ex-basketball player is an indication that, like his father, Kim Jong-un will adhere to the unwritten rules of escalation control that Pyongyang watchers and intelligence analysts have become accustomed to when analyzing North Korean provocative behavior. During the March/April crisis, North Korea took unconditional stands (the abrogation of the Armistice Treaty), made unexpected moves (closing of the Kaesong Industrial Complex), and resorted to unprecedented rhetoric (threatening to launch a nuclear attack on the United States)—but in the end, it followed expectations by de-escalating and bringing the crisis to a close at the end of the Key Resolve/Foal Eagle exercise. There are indications that this was a dress rehearsal for the

time Environment: Covert versus Overt Provocations (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses COP-2013-U-005210, July 2013).

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

new regime. If so, other provocations (maybe even more violent ones) could occur. But there is good reason to believe that Kim Jong-un and his regime are pragmatic and are not suicidal. Regime survival remains a fundamental goal, and the regime is not willing to take actions that would consciously violate this bright red line. That said, the potential for miscalculation on Pyongyang's part, especially with regard to South Korea's red lines, is a real source of concern.

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Conclusion

At the time of this writing, the 19th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's death just passed, on July 8. In commemoration of this event, a leadership procession, led by Kim Jong-un, made its way to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where the founder of the regime lies in state. In the commemorative photograph that appeared in *Nodong Sinmun*, Kim Jong-un is seen walking two steps ahead of a group of North Korean leaders, dressed in military uniforms (with the exception of the Premier, Pak Pong-ju). Kim "and his companions" entered the main hall of the palace and bowed in respect to the statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. They then visited the chamber containing Kim Il-sung's preserved remains and bowed to him "in humblest reverence," according to KCNA. The scene was meant to portray a leadership that is steeped in history and one that is stable and unified behind its Supreme Leader.

This paper has argued that the transition of power from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un went smoothly. Kim Jong-un has received the titles of authority, and in all likelihood, he is the ultimate decision-maker. He, however, has not consolidated his power—something that will most likely take at least another year or two as he learns the ropes of leadership and develops the relationships he will need to rule. Until then, he must rely on a close-knit group of regents and advisors. The bubble around Kim Jong-un appears stable, although a struggle for influence may be emerging between Jang Song-taek and Choe Ryong-hae. For now, this struggle appears benign and unlikely to upset the delicate balance that is needed for the consolidation process to proceed. While there are struggles for power and influence going on at the second and third echelons of leadership, they are not aimed at the young leader and he is largely immune from this churn.

The future of the regime at this point is not clear. Its stability over the long term is still in question, as is the policy course that Kim Jong-un will ultimately take. Will Kim Jong-un be able to seamlessly step into the shoes of his father and grandfather to become the legitimate and unchallenged Supreme Leader? Will the North Korean leadership willingly accept Kim's dictates once he moves beyond the dictates laid

down in Kim Jong-il's last will and testament? Will Kim Jong-un break ranks with his heritage and lead North Korea on a fundamentally new path (both internally and externally) or will he be content to muddle through, seeking only to make changes around the margins? Although many in the Pyongyang watching community have come to conclusions on these answers, this author would argue that the future is not yet set. Politics inside the regime remain to be played out—and until this occurs, Kim's true intentions, and even his own survival, cannot be divined. That said, he faces some very real challenges in the near future as he guides the regime—one internal and one external.

As noted, at the moment, the stability of the circle at the top around Kim Jong-un appears stable, keeping him somewhat isolated from the power struggles and widespread policy debates taking place at the lower echelons of the leadership. But, if this “bubble” were to become weakened or fractured because of death or influence peddling before Kim consolidates his power, it could expose the young Supreme Leader to this churn and unleash a set of forces that could lead to instability within the North Korean leadership. Even if Kim is able to keep his lieutenants in line, he will have to push aside his regents at some point, in order to fully consolidate power. This act of political growth could have unintended consequences that if not managed properly could weaken the regime at the top. Managing any transition is an exercise in patience and skill. Only time will tell whether Kim Jong-un is up to the job of maneuvering his way through the complicated landscape of North Korean politics to fully assume the hereditary mantle that his father left to him.

On the policy front, North Korea is stuck between two major competing policy goals. Pyongyang needs the United States as an enemy, in order to consolidate support within the regime around the new leadership and its wider policy agenda. Without a viable external threat, the propaganda that spews from the North Korean media about sacrifice and “military first” ring hollow. At the same time, securing support from the international community, including a peace treaty with the United States and South Korea that will bring with it follow-on security guarantees and economic assistance, is at the heart of the regime's promises to create a “strong and prosperous nation”—a promise that if left unfulfilled will undermine Kim Jong-un's ability to fully consolidate his power.

These goals are diametrically opposed and cannot be achieved simultaneously; although at least rhetorically that is the strategy the regime has laid out for itself. Whether Kim Jong-un and his advisors have a roadmap for moving in one direction or the other is not clear. As a consequence, it is a real possibility that North Korea does nothing more than “muddle through.” It has a standard set of tactics and strategies (well-worn and in the past somewhat successful) that, at least for the time being, are easier to follow, but do not constitute a long-term strategic set of choices and will not lead to any dramatic breakthroughs in how North Korea conducts its business.

In his recent testimony before Congress, the director of national intelligence, James R. Clapper, provided a blunt assessment of the intelligence community’s understanding of Kim Jong-un’s North Korea. He pointed out that there is a “lack of agreement on assessing many things in North Korea.” As this paper has shown, this lack of agreement extends to the leadership in Pyongyang. This is a situation that will likely become clearer in the next year or two. As Kim consolidates his position at the top of the North Korean regime, many questions should be answered. The Pyongyang-watching community should be able to make more definitive judgments about who Kim Jong-un is and what he plans to do. This paper has presented a snapshot in time and, hopefully, has created a baseline for such future assessments.

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