

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

A Second Year Assessment

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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. In December 2013, Kim Jong-un violently purged his uncle, Jang Song-taek, in a move that seemingly has accelerated his power consolidation process. He is 30 (or 31) years old.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is an update of an earlier CNA monograph published in September 2013 that examined the leadership and decision-making dynamics under Kim Jong-un. The author felt that Jang Song-taek's purge and the ramifications it has for the North Korean political structure are so profound that an update was warranted.

The September 2013 monograph argued that Kim Jong-un, while the ultimate decision-maker and sole source of legitimacy for the regime, had yet to fully consolidate his power. While he may have been invested with inherent legitimacy by virtue of his position as Supreme Leader, he still needed to grow into the position and learn how to effectively wield power. This was a process of demonstrating capability and relationship building that could take one to two more years. In

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<sup>1</sup> 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 8 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*, 9 September 2013.

fact, Kim Jong-un, the paper argued, was 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 was drawing to a close in the fall of 2013, focused on the stabilization of the three-generation hereditary succession. In this period, potential opposition to the hereditary transition of power had been stamped out through purges and retirements.
- The second phase, which began in earnest in 2013, was focused on Kim's steps to establish a power base, which would owe its loyalty directly to him. This patronage system would likely be tied to moves to accommodate the twin regime policy philosophies of "Military First" and "Creating a Strong and Powerful Nation." It was likely that as this phase played out and Kim Jong-un began to exert his independence as a decision-maker, the current regent/advisory structure would begin to change—something that could lead to churn within the upper reaches of the leadership.
- The final phase, according to many Pyongyang watchers, would begin around 2015, when Kim Jong-un would be able to assume the full responsibilities of his position as Supreme Leader. He would have established his own decision-making processes and would be more directly responsible for policy formulation and execution. He would most likely begin to marginalize his regents, which could intensify the opposition exhibited in phase 2.

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

The move against Jang, the reasons for which are unclear as of this writing (January 2014), has accelerated this timeline. Instead of entering the second phase, as was argued in the previous edition of this paper, Kim Jong-un has quickly moved to the final phase of power consolidation. The regent structure that was placed around him by

Kim Jong-il has nearly evaporated, and the remaining regents are more accurately described as senior advisors.

## Leadership dynamics before the Jang Song-taek purge

The September 2013 monograph outlined an idiosyncratic process whereby Kim Jong-un's regents played a major role in educating the young leader on his new role, as well as giving him the situational awareness he needed 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 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 was a figurehead with no real authority was most likely untrue. That said, he lacked 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 apparently put into place a unique decision-making model that was quite different from the informal hub-and-spoke system Kim Jong-il relied on—something that was more formal and institution based.

- Strategic-level decisions were most likely discussed and made within a small group of Kim family members and trusted associates. This inner core was 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 was the ultimate decision-maker. Kim Kyong-hui was the senior regent. She was responsible for her nephew's leadership education. She also safeguarded the Kim family equities. Therefore, she had veto power over any decisions made at the senior level with the exception of those made by Kim Jong-un. Jang Song-taek 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, was the most powerful figure in the high command, even though he did not have a military background. He was responsible for ensuring the loyalty of the armed forces.



His reports to Kim Jong-un were direct, bypassing Jang Song-taek.

- As the “Control Tower,” Jang Song-taek was responsible for running the day-to-day operations of the regime. He also had visibility of message traffic on its way up to Kim Jong-un. Jang could make comments on and prioritize these reports, but could not change them in any way. He was most likely Kim Jong-un’s senior advisor on policy. Jang (as Kim Jong-il once did as Supreme Leader) regularly interacted with various issue-oriented task groups, which were responsible for generating options and then reaching consensus on policy guidance. Jang used this guidance to frame his discussions with Kim, and from these meetings senior-level decisions on policy were made. Politburo and other formal leadership bodies may have fed into this process, but they were not decision-making bodies. At most, they could 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 defector testimony, Kim convened meetings on Tuesdays and Fridays. The Tuesday meetings, which were originally organized by former Premier Choe Yong-nim (and may now be handled by Premier Pak Pong-ju), focused on domestic and social issues. The Friday meetings, which were organized by Kim Kyong-hui, were dedicated to national security issues. These meetings served an educational function by giving Kim Jong-un a chance to discuss policy matters in greater detail with regime subject matter experts. They also allowed him to develop the relationships he would need in order to eventually consolidate his power. Jang Song-taek did 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.

## Leadership dynamics since the Jang Song-taek purge

In December 2013, Jang Song-taek was removed from all his posts and, following a military trial, was executed. Not only was his very public purge a shock to the Pyongyang-watching community, but its impact inside North Korea cannot be overstated. The full implications of the purge are not yet known. What this means for regime stability is also unclear, although for the moment Kim's hold on power appears solid. One thing seems to be beyond doubt, however: the elimination of the second most powerful person in the regime will have profound consequences for leadership dynamics and how decisions are made. Based on a close reading of the North Korean media and a trip by the author to the region in December, which included discussions with numerous Pyongyang watchers and senior defectors, some initial takeaways are possible.

- Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power has *apparently* accelerated and moved into its final phase. Why this acceleration took place and who initiated it are still in question and open to interpretation. According to South Korea's National Intelligence Service, it was linked to an investigation into Jang Song-taek's monopolization of critical resources. There is also speculation that the health of Kim Jong-un's aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, may have forced the young leader to preemptively move against his uncle in order to prevent the solidification of a second power center within the regime. Still others believe that Jang's demise was orchestrated by a third party—namely, the Party's powerful Organization Guidance Department, with which Jang had been locked in a power struggle since the mid 2000s.
- Media treatment of the second anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death, which came about only days after Jang Song-taek's execution, reflects continuity of the leadership centered on Kim Jong-un. The purge to date of Jang's "faction" appears surgical, at least at the upper echelons, with many senior leaders associated with him remaining in their posts. Rumors of a more extensive purge at the lower echelons of power have been muted—possibly in an effort to mitigate the fallout from Jang's removal.

- The purge of Jang Song-taek and the cooptation or removal of his extensive patronage system will likely create the space for a wider generational shift within the leadership over the next few years. Rising stars in the military and Party are already visible in Kim's guidance inspections, suggesting that members of the third and fourth generations may not be far away from assuming leading roles throughout the regime.
- As Kim Jong-un has seized the reins of power, the role of the regents has significantly changed, from one of mentors to one of advisors. While Kim Kyong-hui has apparently survived the purge of her husband, she has not been seen in public since September (2013). Her name appeared on the funeral committee list for Kim Kuk-tae, the former chairman of the Central Control Committee, who coincidentally passed away during this period. She, however, did not appear at the memorial service for her brother (Kim Jong-il). Choe Ryong-hae's profile has continued to rise and he has been a ubiquitous presence since Jang's demise. According to some Pyongyang watchers, Kim Won-hong, the director of the State Security Department (aka Ministry of State Security), has joined the ranks of Kim Jong-un's senior advisors.
- The role of the Control Tower, which Jang once filled, has apparently shifted to Kim Jong-un and his Personal Secretariat. While the date of this transition is still unclear, defector reporting contends that the Personal Secretariat has assumed the responsibility of coordinating the work of the various issue-oriented task groups. If true, this suggests that Kim Jong-un may be returning to the hub-and-spoke manner in which his father micromanaged the regime.
- While there is little question that Kim Jong-un has consolidated his position as the undeniable source of legitimacy within the regime, the nature of his real power remains in question. Now that the bubble that was provided by his regents has burst, Kim is directly exposed to the power struggles and influence peddling that exist within the wider leadership. His ability to handle this churn will be critical to his ability to effectively rule from this point forward.

## Implications for policy

As for policy execution under Kim Jong-un, the September 2013 monograph described it as occurring 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 might 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.

In the wake of Jang's execution, the North Korean regime has gone to great lengths to demonstrate continuity in its economic policy.

While there is sure to be turnover in the personnel tied to many projects, such as the special economic zones, which were closely tied to Jang, the policy direction, at least for the moment, remains unchanged. As for its foreign/security policy, the regime has continued to selectively engage the outside world, but remains adamant about retaining its nuclear power status.

As of the end of January 2014, the Kim Jong-un regime has not completely revealed itself to the outside world. Many aspects of Kim's rule are reminiscent of his father and grandfather's era. The lack of tolerance for any hint of opposition remains firm, as is reflected in the regime's crackdown and ongoing purges. In the realm of economic and foreign/security policy, however, the direction and intention are not entirely clear. Aspects of the Military First Policy are evident, but so too is a renewed focus on the civilian elements of the economy. Pyongyang also continues its charm offensive toward Seoul, even as it continues its winter military exercises and calls for an end to the upcoming ROK/U.S. military exercises (Key Resolve and Foal Eagle). It is not clear whether Kim Jong-un is willing to chart a fundamentally new course or is just clinging to past strategies to buy time as his consolidation process plays out. Therefore, the discussion that follows represents a snapshot in time of the first two years of the Kim Jong-un era. While the shelf life of some of the information, especially surrounding individual leaders, is limited, the paper does provide a detailed account of many of the issues in play surrounding Kim's consolidation process and the accompanying debates swirling around the Pyongyang-watching community—all of which will continue to be part of the narrative of leadership politics inside North Korea for the foreseeable future.

# Introduction

It has been two years 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 two years in power in an attempt to piece together the picture of how decision-making and policy execution work under the

new leader.<sup>2</sup> 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. Finally, the implications of the purge of Jang Song-taek on leadership and decision-making dynamics, as well as regime policies and stability will be considered.

## 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> The research and analysis for this paper continued through December 2013. Additional information was added in the first weeks of January 2014.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

In December 2013, as the Jang Song-taek affair was unfolding, the author took another trip to the region where he reconnected with many of the same sources to gauge their thinking on what the purge meant for North Korean leadership dynamics. It should be understood, at the time of this writing, there are many theories as to why Jang was purged and the implications this will have for the regime. There is very little evidence. Therefore, what is presented in this paper is a snapshot in time that may or may not be ground truth.

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

- *North Korean Leadership Dynamics and Decision-making under Kim Jong-un: A First Year Assessment* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Occasional Publication 2013-U-005684, September 2013).
- *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 Sylas 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. The paper concludes with an epilogue that discusses the Jang Song-taek purge, possible reasons, and potential impact.

## 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 17 December 2011. Over the course of 2012 and into 2013, Kim Jong-un and his supporters embarked on a campaign to further transform the leadership. Surprising to many Pyongyang watchers, this exercise in power consolidation moved at a rapid pace and included purges of officials considered close to Kim Jong-il. Some old faces returned to the second and third echelons of power, which raised questions about Kim Jong-un's policy proclivities. But in many cases, the rising stars were new officials whose direct loyalties were 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 17 December and the final mourning ceremonies, jumped from 14<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> 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 29<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>. 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 was 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.<sup>4</sup> In March (2012), the South Korean press began to note that U Tong-chuk had not been seen in public since February.<sup>5</sup> Then it was reported that he had suffered a stroke.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> He was replaced by another member of the funeral proces-

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<sup>4</sup> "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.

<sup>5</sup> U Tong-chuk was last seen at the celebration of the Day of the Shining Star (Kim Jong-il's birthday) on 16 February. 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.

<sup>6</sup> "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.

<sup>7</sup> 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. Even though Kim lost his portfolio as minister of People's Armed Forces, the de facto number two position in the military, he retains his posts on

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> The KCNA announcement, which attributed his re-

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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.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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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 8 July.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> According to the defectors associated with the North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity, Ri Yong-ho was purged at a meeting of the Politburo on 15 July. 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 indicated that Ri was currently under “house arrest” somewhere in North Hamgyong Province.<sup>12</sup>

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 10 April 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 24<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>. 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.<sup>13</sup> He was included in a growing clique of younger-generation military officers and Party cadre tied to Jang Song-taek.<sup>14</sup> On 30 October 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 17 December, 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

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

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

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> While Kim lost his seat on the NDC at the 7<sup>th</sup> Session of 12<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in April 2013,<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

There was a great deal of speculation within Pyongyang-watching circles on these purges of military leaders that took place in 2012.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 had close relationships and who owed their loyalty to him.<sup>20</sup> Under both

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<sup>15</sup> "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 16 April 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.

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

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

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

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

<sup>20</sup> 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 suggested 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 83<sup>rd</sup> on the funeral list for Cho Myong-nok (former director of the GPB) and 77<sup>th</sup> 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).<sup>21</sup>

Kim Kyok-sik's career, while it predated Kim Jong-un's appointment as heir apparent, was 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-

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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.

<sup>21</sup> KCNA announced Kim Jong-un's appointment as marshal on 18 July, 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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).<sup>24</sup> At the Party Conference and subsequent SPA meeting, Kim became a full Politburo member and member of the NDC.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> While it was 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.

<sup>23</sup> Author's interview in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> At the Central Committee Plenum on 31 March 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.<sup>28</sup> He appeared in a photograph of a briefing that Kim Jong-un was receiving on operations associated with the evolving crisis.<sup>29</sup> Ri's name

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<sup>26</sup> In 2012/2013, the demographics of the high command began to shift. Flag officers in their 60s and older were almost, but not entirely, supplanted. At the same time, the appointments appeared to signify a move in favor of military leaders with field experience.

<sup>27</sup> 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 did not mention this demotion.

<sup>28</sup> *Nodong Sinmun Online*, 29 March 2013. It was 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," 3 July 2012.

<sup>29</sup> 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 media never identified a current occupant of this position. The only

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.<sup>30</sup> 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 (17 December 2012). His name also appeared alongside Choe's in the Kim Jong-il funeral committee list.<sup>31</sup>

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-un was coming on the scene.<sup>32</sup> He also had a high profile during the

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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.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> KCNA, 19 December 2011. Col. Gen. Ri Yong-gil was also a member of the Cho Myong-nok State Funeral Committee.

<sup>32</sup> 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

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.<sup>33</sup> On 25 July, 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.<sup>34</sup> In August, he was identified as the director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau.<sup>35</sup> Not much was 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).<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

At a performance of the Korean People's Internal Security Forces' Dance Ensemble on 13 May, Col. Gen. Jang Jong-nam was identified

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the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assemblies, which suggests that his ties to Pyongyang were developed before Kim Jong-un became heir apparent.

<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> "Wreaths Laid Before Cemetery of Fallen Fighters of CPV," KCNA, 26 July 2013.

<sup>35</sup> This time line is based on Ri Yong-gil's appointment as chief of the General Staff, thus leaving the Operations Bureau post vacant. In addition, film footage of the military parade and demonstration on the 65th anniversary of the country's foundation on 9 September 2013 shows a KPA officer who resembles Col. Gen. Pyon briefing Kim Jong-un during the Worker-Peasant Red Guards' parade, a position normally reserved for the director of the Operations Bureau.

<sup>36</sup> KCNA, 14 March 2013.

<sup>37</sup> "North Replaces Commander of Key Frontline Unit," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 30 April 2013.

as the new minister of People's Armed Forces, replacing Gen. Kim Kyok-sik.<sup>38</sup> This was the third appointment to this post in a little over a year.<sup>39</sup> Jang Jong-nam was the former commander of the First Corps (responsible for guarding the front lines in Kangwon Province).<sup>40</sup> His appointment continued a set of appointments designed to bring a new generation into the high command.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> He also spoke at a Party-army

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<sup>38</sup> 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 81<sup>st</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> 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 have been an indication that the senior ranks of the armed forces were unsettled.

<sup>40</sup> 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 13 May 2013, the photograph showed Jang with three stars (colonel general) on his epaulets.

<sup>41</sup> Jang Jong-nam was in his 50s, while Kim Kyok-sik was 75.

<sup>42</sup> Many in the international media speculated that Kim Kyok-sik was removed because he was "hawkish." This was 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*, 4 July 2011. It should be noted that, according to some sources, at least four corps commanders (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>) have been replaced since the beginning of 2013. Most of this reshuffle was tied to the senior level appointments made at the end of April and the beginning of May. "Kim Jong-un

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.<sup>43</sup>

Days after Jang Jong-nam was identified as the new minister of People's Armed Forces,<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> Jon apparently has replaced long-time Kim family associate (and Kim Jong-il military aide), VMAR Hyon Chol-hae.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> Jon Chang-bok was Hyon's predecessor as director of the KPA General Logistics Department (GLD) and in August 2011,<sup>48</sup> he led a delegation of KPA

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Replaces More Than Half of Corps Commanders Over Four Months in 2013," *Kungmin Ilbo Online*, 8 August 2013.

<sup>43</sup> 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.

<sup>44</sup> 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.

<sup>45</sup> KCNA, 16 May 2013. See also "North Korea Replaces Vice Minister of Defense," *Yonhap*, 17 May 2013.

<sup>46</sup> 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.

<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> Jon Chang-bok was director of the GLD from August 2011 to April 2012.



logistical personnel to China and held talks with Defense Minister Liang Guanglie. It is not clear whether Jon has reassumed that post.

On 22 May, 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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 when indications surfaced in the North Korean media that Kim Kyok-sik had been replaced by Ri Yong-gil. In an 29 August 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.<sup>51</sup> Kim Kyok-sik was not identified as one of those attending the

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<sup>49</sup> KCBS, 22 May 2013.

<sup>50</sup> The return of Kim Kyok-sik to the General Staff (albeit temporarily) served notice that the regime intended 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 was not clear that Hyon Yong-chol had the gravitas and influence throughout the high command to enforce such control.

<sup>51</sup> 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

event. Ri Yong-gil and Jang Jong-nam were also shown wearing four stars—the appropriate ranks for the Chief of the General Staff and Minister of People’s Armed Forces.<sup>52</sup> While the reason for this apparent reshuffle was the subject of widespread speculation in the South Korean media, it did not appear to be the result of a purge.<sup>53</sup> It suggested that Kim Jong-un was continuing to populate the formal political and military leadership with individuals who owed their loyalty directly to him while moving more senior leaders who had ties to both him and his father into the background. If true, Kim Kyok-sik would most likely continue to play a vital role as an advisor behind the scenes (possibly within Kim Jong-un’s Personal Secretariat).<sup>54</sup>

At the time of this writing, Kim Jong-un’s control over the military is still in debate.<sup>55</sup> 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

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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.

<sup>52</sup> Korean Central Television, 29 August 2013.

<sup>53</sup> 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.

<sup>54</sup> 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.

<sup>55</sup> 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. Before his purge, some argued that Jang Song-taek, via his late brothers who were military officers, also had a patronage system. If this speculation was 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.

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 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, which is responsible for ensuring the high command's loyalty to the Party and Supreme Leader.<sup>56</sup> 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 critical because if Kim Jong-un is ever to fully assume the role of Supreme Leader, he will need the unwavering support of the military.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> 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. See Chong Song-chang, *DPRK Leadership Under Kim Jong-un* (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> 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 148 major promotions.

## 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. Through his first year in power and well into his second, Kim Jong-un was 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 had to make adaptations in order to rule until he was able to consolidate his power. In the view of many Pyongyang watchers at the time, it would be another year or two until he would be able to make decisions and conduct politics on his own.

This section of the paper will analyze how the regime operated up to the point of the dramatic purge of Jang Song-taek. It will first examine the leadership culture in North Korea, which was 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 who surrounded 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* system<sup>58</sup>

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 system”) or “*Yuil Cheje*” (“a monolithic system”).<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> 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).

<sup>59</sup> 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.

<sup>60</sup> 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.

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.<sup>61</sup>

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.”<sup>62</sup> 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 infra-

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<sup>61</sup> 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 “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.

<sup>62</sup> 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).

structure was the Party's Political Bureau (Politburo), where senior-level debates were held and Kim's thinking was fleshed out.<sup>63</sup> These 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.<sup>64</sup> 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

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<sup>63</sup> 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 Kukka-jo'llyak-kwa 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 South Korea in 1996 and is currently working for the Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul.

<sup>64</sup> 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).

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. Only 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> 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*, 5 January 2007.

<sup>66</sup> 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.



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 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.<sup>67</sup> 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

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<sup>67</sup> 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'inaehanu'n 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" (*hyesu'ngja*) in May 1981, "respected and beloved Kim Jong-il" (*kyo'ngaehanu'n 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.

National Defense Commission (NDC) in status.<sup>68</sup> 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 informal meeting in 1997.<sup>69</sup> 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."<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.

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<sup>68</sup> The Supreme Commander was now intrinsically linked to the post of Chairman of the NDC.

<sup>69</sup> *Wolgan Chosun*, April 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Jae Jean-suh, "Possibility for WKP to Take Back Role of Decision-making," *Vantage Point* 33, no. 8 (August 2010).

<sup>71</sup> 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.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Supreme People's Assembly convened in Pyongyang on 5 September 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,<sup>72</sup> ending speculation on when his son would 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.<sup>73</sup> 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

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<sup>72</sup> 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 SPA Standing Committee, positions that signaled their withdrawal from front-line political affairs. *Chungang Ilbo*, 7 September 1998.

<sup>73</sup> 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.”

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 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.<sup>74</sup> 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 opera-

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<sup>74</sup> 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).

tions.”<sup>75</sup> 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.”<sup>76</sup> For many Pyongyang watchers, this latter revision validated the transformation 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 changed with the purge of Ri Yong-ho and the evolving role of O Kuk-ryol within the regime. According to most Pyongyang watchers, through his first two years in power (until the purge of Jang Song-taek in December 2013), this inner circle around Kim Jong-un was composed of three regents who served as the gatekeepers, ensured his situational awareness, assisted him in developing critical relationships, and guided his decision-making.<sup>77</sup> All three had their own functional responsibilities and influence.

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<sup>75</sup> 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.

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

<sup>77</sup> It should be noted that this was only one theory of how power and politics works at the highest leadership level around Kim Jong-un. It was based on the notion that senior level command and control had carried over from the Kim Jong-il era where there was no viable opposition to the Supreme Leader, only degrees of influence. As mentioned earlier, this theory was opposed by one that came out of North Korea via informant channels soon after Kim Jong-un took power, which argued that there

- **Kim Kyong-hui (67)** was the premier regent and wielded the most influence with Kim Jong-un.<sup>78</sup> According to one source,

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were 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 stressed 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, insisted on developing the country’s critical defense systems (missile and nuclear) in the name of *Songun*.

The problem was 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 contended, the missile and nuclear tests (at the end of 2012 and beginning of 2013) indicated that the hard line faction had gained in influence. This theory also suggested that while Kim Jong-un may have been surrounded by regents from the moderate faction, the individuals and institutions directly responsible for his personal protection fell into the hard line camp. See “The Rise of Moderate and Hard-line Factions in North Korea,” *Sankei Shimbun*, 1 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.”

<sup>78</sup> Reports began to surface in the South Korean media in July (2013) that Kim Kyong-hui was critically ill. 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. 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

she was the only person allowed to verbally discuss policy with Kim Jong-un; others must make their suggestions in written form.<sup>79</sup> She was responsible for coaching Kim Jong-un on how to conduct politics and took the lead in ensuring that he developed the critical relationships throughout the regime that he would 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 was responsible for ensuring that the Kim family equities were respected and protected. In this capacity, she apparently had veto power over all decisions except those made by Kim Jong-un himself. How she used this veto power (either on her own or through Kim Jong-un) was not clear.<sup>80</sup> Her health was rumored to be growing worse, although she still managed (until September 2013) to make appearances at critical leadership events.

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'Sick' Aunt Resurfaces," *Chosun Ilbo Online*, 27 July 2013. At the time of this writing (January 2014), she has again disappeared and has not been seen in public since September 2013.

<sup>79</sup> 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.

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



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

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 14<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, something confirmed by her ranking on the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee list (December 2013). It has been rumored that Kim Kyong-hui is the director of the powerful KWP Organization Guidance Department.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> Behind the scenes, ac-

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<sup>81</sup> 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*.

<sup>82</sup> 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 en-



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.<sup>83</sup>

- **Jang Song-taek (67)** until his execution at the end of 2013 was, for all intents and purposes, the number two leader within the regime next to Kim Jong-un.<sup>84</sup> Up to the point of his demise,

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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.

<sup>83</sup> Author's discussions in Seoul in April 2013.

<sup>84</sup> 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 eclipsed Kim. According to some senior defectors, the concept of informal power rankings is a foreign concept North Korea. There is the Supreme Leader and everyone else. See interview with Choe Ju-hwal, the highest-ranking North Korean military defector in South Korea (*New Focus International*, 11 January 2014). That said, 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 de facto "second in command." Most of the senior leadership was included in the SPCSGC. Although in principle, the goal of founding the SPCSGC lay in "holding and guiding the general work of the physical culture and sports of the country in a unified manner," Jang Song-taek would 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 were not able to carry out their duties.

The South Korean press speculated on Jang Song-taek's standing within the leadership given his reduction in public appearances in 2013 vice 2012. The reason for Jang's public profile could have been attached to Kim Jong-un's need to be seen as the leader, as well as Jang's likely heavy workload. Jang continued to make appearances at high-level events such as the opening ceremony for the Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs' Cemetery in Pyongyang on 25 July, 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.

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

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<sup>85</sup> 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.”

<sup>86</sup> “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 was 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 oversaw one of the largest and most diverse patronage systems within the North Korean leadership.

- **VMAR Choe Ryong-hae (63)** was the junior member of the regents surrounding Kim Jong-un.<sup>87</sup> His role is to ensure the loy-

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<sup>87</sup> 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-

ality 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 18<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>. 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,<sup>88</sup> the Party's surveillance organ within the armed forces.<sup>89</sup> 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 was not clear,<sup>90</sup> the potential existed for Kim Jong-un (with Kim Kyong-hui's assistance) to play the two off against each other in

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

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

<sup>89</sup> 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.

<sup>90</sup> The relationship between Choe Ryong-hae and Jang Song-taek was the subject of much debate within the South Korean Pyongyang-watching community. Some believed that the close ties between the two in their days in the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League created a bond that continued to exist. They pointed 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 believed that Choe's ties are closer to Kim Kyong-hui than to Jang Song-taek and that Kim used Choe to keep her erstwhile husband in check. They argued 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*, 5 July 2013.

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



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 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

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<sup>91</sup> Some Pyongyang watchers argued that there was 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*.

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.<sup>92</sup>

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.<sup>93</sup> The KWP's Secretarial Office was established in the early 1970s to assist Kim Jong-il as he prepared his father's succession.<sup>94</sup> In the early 1980s, after Kim was nominated as a 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

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<sup>92</sup> Author's interview in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>93</sup> 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.

<sup>94</sup> 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.

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.<sup>95</sup> 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.<sup>96</sup>



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 keeping” 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

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<sup>95</sup> Author's discussions in Seoul, November 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

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.<sup>97</sup> 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.<sup>98</sup>

Closely associated with Kim Jong-il's Personal Secretariat (and even overlapping at times) was an entity known as the "Third Floor."<sup>99</sup> 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 created by laying in 3 percent of the budget. They were akin to the re-

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<sup>97</sup> "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).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> 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.



sources reserved in preparation for war.<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup> For the next few years, his apparatus was closely tied to his father's Personal Secretariat.<sup>102</sup> 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

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<sup>100</sup> U Chong-chang, "ROK Monthly on DPRK Kim Jong-il's Slush Fund Deposits in Swiss Banks," *Seoul Wolgan Chosun*, 1 November 2000.

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

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

matters of state.<sup>103</sup> 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.<sup>104</sup>

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.<sup>105</sup> 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.<sup>106</sup> This would not be surprising because ever since Kim Jong-il's stroke in 2008,<sup>107</sup> the Kim family clan

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<sup>103</sup> 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.

<sup>104</sup> 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.

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

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> 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.<sup>108</sup>

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.<sup>109</sup> 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."<sup>110</sup>

Kim Sol-song (39) has extensive experience working inside the Party and state apparatus. She was born in 1974, and, when in her teens,

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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.

<sup>108</sup> According to one long-time North Korean leadership watcher, Jon Hui-jeong, the husband of Jang Song-ae (Jang Song-taek's sister) and the father of Jang Song-taek's son-in-law (Jon Yong-jin), is a foreign policy advisor in Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat. Jon 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. Jon's status since Jang's purge is unknown.

<sup>109</sup> 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. According to another source, Kim's chief of staff is Kim Chang-son. See "Pyongyang Did China Business As It Purged Jang," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 11 December 2013. It should be noted that Kim Chang-son has been identified not as head of Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat, but as the director and chief secretary of the National Defense Commission Secretariat, Kim Jong-un's executive office. He allegedly holds an administrative post as is not privy to the more sensitive communications between Kim and members of his inner circle. Author discussion with senior defector, March 2014.

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

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,<sup>111</sup> which had responsibility for some of the more sensitive financial accounts and acquisition/proliferation of technology.<sup>112</sup> 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,<sup>113</sup> 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

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

<sup>112</sup> "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.

<sup>113</sup> 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*, 3 July 2013.

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 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.<sup>114</sup> 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").<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> 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.

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

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

The picture that emerged of the regime structure in the early years of Kim Jong-un's reign was one in which the Supreme Leader operated in a highly structured bubble surrounded by gatekeepers. His interactions outside of this bubble were somewhat managed (via guidance inspections, for example), but he had 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.

Outside Kim and his closest advisors, two levels of the North Korean leadership are critical to making the regime operate: the second and third echelons.<sup>116</sup> 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-

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<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup> As Kim Jong-un consolidates his position, many of these leaders will likely disappear from this echelon—possibly as soon as the next leadership meetings in March/April 2014.<sup>118</sup> 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.<sup>119</sup> He

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<sup>117</sup> 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.

<sup>118</sup> 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.

<sup>119</sup> Kim Jong-il and Kim Ki-nam's relationship went back to the 1960s when the two allegedly conspired to weaken the Kim Sung-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

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 had 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.<sup>120</sup>
- **Pak To-chun (69)** is a full member of the Politburo (since 2010), 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.

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strategy to "cut the side branches," a phrase linked to the purge within the Kim family that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>120</sup> *North Korean Leadership Watch*.



- **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 have 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.
- **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.<sup>121</sup> 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

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

within the OGD suggests that he would have some access to Kim Jong-un, but in the past may have 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 *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,<sup>122</sup> 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.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 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.

<sup>123</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul in 2012 and 2013.

- **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.<sup>124</sup> 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 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 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.<sup>125</sup> 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

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<sup>124</sup> He is also the husband of Kim Jong-sun, Kim Il-sung's cousin.

<sup>125</sup> 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.

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 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."<sup>126</sup> In May, he accompanied 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. Ri was replaced as director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau Col. Gen. Pyon In-son.
- **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

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<sup>126</sup> "Kim Jong Un Holds Operations Meeting 29 Mar, Ratifies Plan for Firepower Strike," KCBS, 28 March 2013.

with his second (unannounced) promotion in August.<sup>127</sup> 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.<sup>128</sup> In 1995, he played a 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 had close ties to Jang Song-taek and during the immediate period after Kim Jong-il's death most likely worked closely with him on matters related to building Kim Jong-un's legitimacy within the high command.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> At the time of this writing, Jang appears to have been demoted to three stars (colonel general). The demotion apparently took place early in 2014. He appeared on January 1 as a four star general accompanying Kim Jong-un at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. On 4 February, He appeared on North Korean television on 4 February as a three star colonel general. The reason for the demotion was not immediately clear but could be tied to Kim's efforts to secure control over the military. See "NK Defense Chief Appears to Have Been Demoted in Rank," *Yonhap*, 4 February 2014.

<sup>128</sup> 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.

<sup>129</sup> 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.

- **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.<sup>130</sup> 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.<sup>131</sup> 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;<sup>132</sup> he has probably only moved aside as part of the generational turnover. His access to Kim Jong-un went through Jang Song-taek, with whom Hyon allegedly formed a close relationship when he was director of policy for the NDC. Hyon Chol-hae appeared on the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee, which appeared after Jang's execution, which suggests he has not completely fallen out of favor.
- **Gen. Kim Yong-chol (67)** is a member of the Central Military Commission (since 2010), vice chief of the General Staff (since 2013),<sup>133</sup> and director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (since 2009). His ties to Kim Jong-un allegedly go back to the

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

<sup>131</sup> Author's discussions in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>132</sup> 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.

<sup>133</sup> According to the Ministry of Unification's *Who's Who in Major North Korean Agencies and Organizations in 2013*,<sup>133</sup> 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.

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 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,<sup>134</sup> 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 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 suggested that Yun reported directly to Jang Song-taek, but this was unlikely given the sensitive responsibility of the Guard Command and its relationship to the Supreme Leader. There has been no indication that Yun Jong-rin has been removed as part of the Jang Song-taek purge.
- **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 reported up to Jang Song-taek, the KWP director of Administrative Affairs and vice chairman of

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<sup>134</sup> 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.

the NDC, before the latter's demise.<sup>135</sup> This formal reporting chain was augmented by Kim Won-hong's informal channel to Kim Jong-un on issues of a sensitive nature, a channel that has likely become more formalized since Jang's demise. 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.<sup>136</sup> As minister of People's Security, he reported up to Jang Song-taek and the NDC. This apparently has not hurt his standing within the leadership (in the near term) as he remains in his position following Jang's purge.
- **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 se-

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<sup>135</sup> 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).

<sup>136</sup> "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 reconfirm 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.



curity. 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.<sup>137</sup> 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 stabilizing 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

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<sup>137</sup> 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.

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.<sup>138</sup> 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.<sup>139</sup> According to defector sources, Choe was instrumental in Kim Jong-un's education process and until recently had weekly communications with Kim Jong-un as the person responsible for organizing the Tuesday meetings devoted to domestic and social matters (see discussion below).<sup>140</sup> 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

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<sup>138</sup> 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).

<sup>139</sup> 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.

<sup>140</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

policy away from the so-called "July 1 measure" to improve economy,<sup>141</sup> 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 had to go through Jang Song-taek when the latter was the "Control Tower." But since Jang's execution, Pak most likely now interacts directly with Kim Jong-un. According to one defector source, he has assumed the responsibility (from Choe Yong-nim) for organizing Kim Jong-un's Tuesday meetings on domestic and social issues.<sup>142</sup>

- **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

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<sup>141</sup> 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.

<sup>142</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

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.

- **Ri Chol (aka Ri Su-yong) (72)** was a critical player early in the Kim Jong-un era. He held no official posts within the senior leadership, yet his influence and access were probably quite significant. His ties to the Kim family went 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 was the 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 investors.<sup>143</sup> He was rumored to have been the driving force behind the Egyptian telecommunications company Orascom deal that established North Korea's infrastructure for cell phone service.<sup>144</sup> Ri was also tied to Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat and the secret family slush fund (worth billions) that is used to ensure the regime's

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

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

support among the wider leadership.<sup>145</sup> This all ended around the time of Jang Song-taek's execution.<sup>146</sup> Ri is one of the few officials publicly identified as having been executed. It is rumored that Kim Jong-un's younger sister, Kim Yo-jong, has taken over much of Ri's portfolio.

## 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.

### 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

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<sup>145</sup> "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*.

<sup>146</sup> 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).

confidants. He was responsible, in conjunction with Kim Jong-il, for signing off on all media pronouncements related to inter-Korean relations.<sup>147</sup> 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 presumably includes 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 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).<sup>148</sup> 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

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<sup>147</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, November 2012.

<sup>148</sup> 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.

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. His original ties to the senior leadership come through his former father-in-law, Jon Mun-sop.<sup>149</sup>

- **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 members.<sup>150</sup> 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

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<sup>149</sup> 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.

<sup>150</sup> "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.

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 Mun Kyong-dok apparently had strong ties to Jang Song-taek, he survived the immediate purge. This suggests that either he has temporarily been spared or has managed to establish a close and independent relationship with the Supreme Leader, which could move him 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.<sup>151</sup> Kwak Pom-gi’s elevation to the senior ranks of the leadership was likely tied to Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek with the expectation that he could bring some pragmatism to the decision-making process on the economy. His line of communication to Kim Jong-un most likely went through Jang Song-taek. Following Jang’s purge, he most likely now works more directly with Kim or through Pak Pong-ju.
- **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

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<sup>151</sup> “Kwak Pom-gi Biography,” *North Korean Leadership Watch*.



technical understanding of regime operations at the regional level. Kim replaced the long serving holder of the personnel portfolio, Kim Kuk-tae,<sup>152</sup> 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.<sup>153</sup> Kim Pyong-hae's relationship to Kim Jong-un and his regents is unclear. He allegedly belonged to a group of Party leaders that followed Jang Song-taek.<sup>154</sup> 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 had ties to the province in terms of economy and political control. That said, Kim Pyong-hae survived Jang's purge and remains in place as of this writing (January 2014).

- **Thae Jong-su (77)** is an alternate member of the Politburo (since 2010), KWP Secretary for General Affairs (since 2010), 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.<sup>155</sup> 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

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<sup>152</sup> 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, 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.

<sup>153</sup> 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.

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

<sup>155</sup> 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.

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.<sup>156</sup> Although Thae most likely had direct links to Jang Song-taek, this did not impact his standing in the leadership following Jang's purge. Given his links to the KWP General Department, 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.<sup>157</sup> His access to the senior leadership probably comes via Choe Ryong-hae, who is the KWP Secretary for Military Affairs.
- **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 pub-

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

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

lic legitimacy campaign around Kim Jong-un. He was ranked 120<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>158</sup> 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 124<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>159</sup>
- **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 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.<sup>160</sup> Han's promotion ap-

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

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> 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

parently 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.<sup>161</sup> As such, Han most likely has some access to Kim Jong-un, the extent of which is currently unclear.

## Military

- **Col. Gen. Pyon In-son** is director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau. As such, he is responsible for the daily operational management of the armed forces and supervises the formulation and implementation of the KPA's training and contingency planning. He is part of the third generation of the military leadership. He is also a member of the KWP Central Committee and deputy to the Supreme People's Assembly. He was promoted to Colonel General on 25 July 2003.

Pyon's career has been spent moving between Pyongyang and the field commands. His early career was primarily served in headquarters in the Ministry of People's Armed Forces before

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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.

<sup>161</sup> 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 Ko Yong-hui, Kim Jong-il's fourth wife, in 2004. Following his removal, the director post remained vacant until Han's apparent appointment.

he assumed the command of the VII Army Corps in South Hamgyong Province in the late 1990s. In 2007, he returned to Pyongyang as a vice minister of the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. Four years later, he was returned to the field as the commander of IV Army Corps in South Hwanghae Province. Following the March/April crisis, he returned to the center as a vice minister of the MPAF and director of the General Staff Operations Bureau (August 2013). From this position, Pyon most likely has some routine contact with Kim Jong-un, especially as part of the latter's guidance inspections. Whether he has achieved unfettered access or must still go through the chain of command (i.e., Ri Yong-gil) is currently unclear.

- **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 request for modern fighter aircraft.<sup>162</sup> 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.<sup>163</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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"

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

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

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."<sup>164</sup> 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 responsibility 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.<sup>165</sup>

- **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 15 April to the "bold soldiers of the People's Army,

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

<sup>165</sup> 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.

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 KWP Central Committee in September 2010 at the Third Party Conference.<sup>166</sup> 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 61<sup>st</sup> out of 171 members) and Kim Jong-il in 2011 (listed 84<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>167</sup> 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.

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<sup>166</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

<sup>167</sup> Pyongyang radio, 25 and 27 August 2011.

- **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 108<sup>th</sup> 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 advisor. 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 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.<sup>168</sup> While this seems like a demotion, he may have been given an important mission.<sup>169</sup> In such case, he most likely be-

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<sup>168</sup> 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 3 June (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 30 April, he was wearing the rank of a full general (four stars).

<sup>169</sup> 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



longs in this third echelon of leaders who has occasional interaction with Kim Jong-un.<sup>170</sup>

- **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, giving 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 13 April 1999. Col. Gen. Ri was elected to membership on the Party Central Committee on 28 September 2010. On 19 October 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.<sup>171</sup>
- **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

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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.

<sup>170</sup> 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*, 3 June 2013.

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

continues to make appearances, his profile has fallen in recent years.<sup>172</sup> 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)).<sup>173</sup> His career has been spent in the 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 were with Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek. Following Jang's purge and Kim's apparent incapacitation, his channel to the Supreme Leader is unclear.
- **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

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<sup>172</sup> 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.

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

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.<sup>174</sup> 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.<sup>175</sup> 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 communication to the senior leadership most likely went through Pak Pong-ju and Jang Song-taek. Although he was rumored to be close to Jang Song-taek, he was not part of the initial purge as evidenced by his appearance on the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee list.

- **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.<sup>176</sup> 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

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<sup>174</sup> “Report on Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of WPK Central Committee,” KCNA, 4 November 2012.

<sup>175</sup> “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.

<sup>176</sup> *North Korean Leadership Watch*.

is the first chairman of the NDC, but he most likely interacts with the senior leadership through Pak To-chun and Ju Kyuchang, 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 25 January 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.<sup>177</sup>

## 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.<sup>178</sup> These are the up-and-coming North Korean leaders, who will likely assume critical positions as Kim consolidates his power.

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<sup>177</sup> 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 Policy Elites* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis Paper P-3903, June 2004).

<sup>178</sup> 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.

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

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Comment</b>
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 <sup>th</sup> on Kim Jong-il's funeral list. Spoke publicly to KCNA in 2012, vowing to destroy the South Korean regime. Delivered speech at the Pyongyang Army-People Joint Meeting 14 February (2013) to mark the third nuclear test. Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in March 2012.
COL GEN Kang Phyoyong	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 Tonghak	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 Jongchon	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.

Name	Position	Comment
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 1 February 2009 ceremony to vote for Kim Jong-il as a candidate to the 12 <sup>th</sup> 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 detachments 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. <sup>179</sup>

<sup>179</sup> "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 be-

Name	Position	Comment
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.
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	Deputy Director of the KWP Machine Industry Department	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. <sup>180</sup> On 17 March (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

longing 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.

<sup>180</sup> 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*, 3 July 2013.

Name	Position	Comment
		the Council of the Functionaries in the Munitions Industry Sector. <sup>181</sup>
Ma Won-chun	KWP Finance and Accounting Department Vice Director	Began appearing with Kim Jong-un on guidance inspections in May 2012. <sup>182</sup>
Choe Hwi	KWP OGD First Vice Director	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

<sup>181</sup> "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*, 3 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.

<sup>182</sup> 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 9 May 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*, 5 July 2013.



Name	Position	Comment
		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). <sup>183</sup> He came to the notice of many Pyongyang watchers when he appeared at Kim Jong-un's 25 January (2013) meeting with security and foreign affairs officials—days before the third nuclear test. Hong was ranked 126 <sup>th</sup> 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 <sup>th</sup> 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 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. <sup>184</sup> 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	Kang's position on the CPRF Secretariat sug-

<sup>183</sup> "Biographical profile of Hong Sung-mu," *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 4 February 2013.

<sup>184</sup> 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

Name	Position	Comment
	the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland Secretariat	gests that he is also a vice director of the KWP Unification Department. <sup>185</sup> 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."
Pak Jong-nam	Kangwon Provincial Party Committee Chief Secretary	Has served in the Kangwon apparatus at least since 2001. Kim Jong-un reportedly is showing favor to this province, where he was born. According to some rumors, Pak has been brought to Pyongyang to support Choe Ryong-hae.
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.
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.

<sup>185</sup> 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, 1 February 2013.

Name	Position	Comment
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.
Kim Chol-jin	Vice director of the National Committee for Economic Development	Began accompanying Kim Jong-un to economic sites in September 2013. Other information suggests that he has been involved in economic affairs at a high level at least since the beginning of 2012. He served at the North's Ministry of Foreign Trade and at government agencies facilitating Chinese investment. Sources say he has extensive business connections in China and experience trading with South Korea in the mid-2000s. He is now being referred in the South Korean press as an "economic tsar," along with Pak Pong-ju and Ro Tu-chol.
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-un<sup>186</sup>

Name	Position	Comment
Kim Jong-chol	Kim Jong-un's older brother	Rumored to be working in either the KWP OGD or SSD.
Kim Yo-jong	Kim Jong-un's younger sister	Rumored to be working in the KWP OGD 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. <sup>187</sup> 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. <sup>188</sup>
Ri Il-hyok	Son of Ri Chol, former ambassador to Switzerland	Rumored to be involved with the <i>Ponghwajo</i> ("Torch Group"). Status since his father's apparent purge is unclear.
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).

<sup>186</sup> 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).

<sup>187</sup> "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.

<sup>188</sup> "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 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").
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. Status since Jang Song-taek's purge is unclear.
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. Status since Jang Song-taek's purge is unclear.
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. <sup>189</sup>

<sup>189</sup> "One of NK's richest men said to serve in assembly hall," *Yonhap*, 19 February 2012.

## 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 was that Kim Jong-un is the final decision-maker. However, there was fierce debate over how the decision-making process worked. Is he in control, setting the decision-making space and arranging the agenda, as is his right under the dictates of the *Suryong* system?<sup>190</sup> Or, as some would argue, is he being buffeted by competing forces within the regime, such as the military? Although information on this issue was limited and came through channels that still needed to be vetted, the picture that seemed to be emerging was much more complex than was often speculated in the open media.

What follows is an analysis of how decision-making may have worked during Kim Jong-un's first year and a half in power. Jang Song-taek's purge has undoubtedly changed this model, something that will be dealt with in the epilogue.

### Kim Jong-il's decision-making model<sup>191</sup>

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

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<sup>190</sup> 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.

<sup>191</sup> 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).

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 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.<sup>192</sup>

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.<sup>193</sup>

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

<sup>193</sup> 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 suc-

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.<sup>194</sup>

### 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.

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cessor, 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. Author'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).

<sup>194</sup> “Analysis of the DPRK Power Group,” *JoongAng Ilbo*, 4 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.<sup>195</sup> 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.<sup>196</sup> 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.<sup>197</sup> 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-

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<sup>195</sup> 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.

<sup>196</sup> 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.

<sup>197</sup> 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.”<sup>198</sup> Kim’s Personal Secretariat prioritized the reports and submitted them for his comment and/or approval.<sup>199</sup>

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.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> 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.

<sup>199</sup> 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.

<sup>200</sup> 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.<sup>201</sup>

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.<sup>202</sup>

## 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 30 or 31 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 went to great lengths during his first years in power to show Kim Jong-un as the leader and ultimate decision-maker.

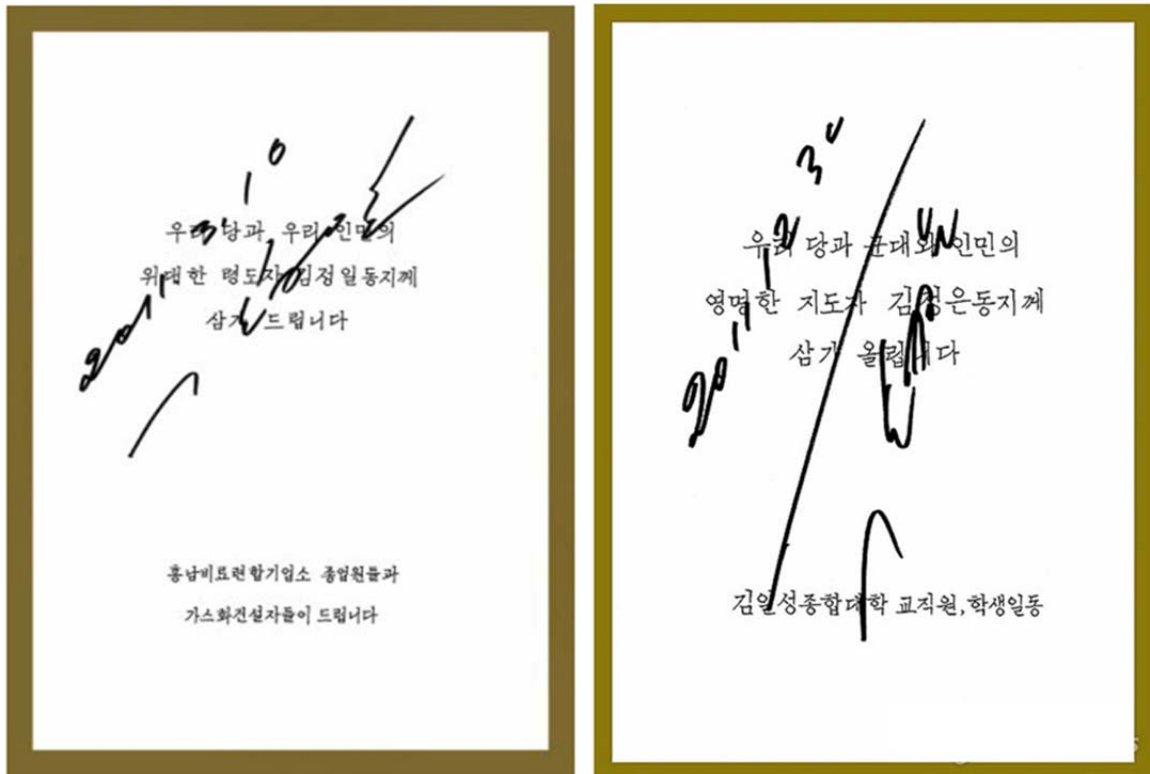
- In January 2012, the North Korean media unveiled photographs of Kim Jong-un's signature and noted that he would

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

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

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



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

<sup>203</sup> 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 2 December 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 advisors 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*, 5 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.<sup>204</sup>



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

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

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<sup>204</sup> 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 17 December 2011. See “Film Released to Mark 1 Year Anniversary of KJI's Death,” *North Korean Leadership Watch*, 13 December 2012.

vailing in the DPRK.”<sup>205</sup> This was the first time that the North Korean media had made public such a leadership meeting.<sup>206</sup> 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.<sup>207</sup>

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

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

<sup>207</sup> *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 25 January 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,<sup>208</sup> 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

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<sup>208</sup> *Nodong Sinmun*, 3 February 2013.

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



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 29 March (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),<sup>211</sup> 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-

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

<sup>210</sup> 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.”

<sup>211</sup> 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.”<sup>212</sup> 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 Gen. Kim Yong-chol (Chief of the Reconnaissance General Bureau and Vide Chief of the KPA General Staff) (Source: *Nodong Sinmun*).

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<sup>212</sup> *Nodong Sinmun*, 29 March 2013.

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*)<sup>213</sup> 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, early in his tenure as Supreme Leader, many Pyongyang watchers speculated on Kim's ability to smoothly control the various agencies focused around the Control Tower.<sup>214</sup> The absence of a strong central Control Tower could thus become, as one Pyongyang watcher noted,

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<sup>213</sup> The literal translation would be “Chief Command Headquarters for 000 Affairs.”

<sup>214</sup> 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.

“the greatest source of uncertainty as the Kim Jong-un regime ventures into the unknown without a manual.”<sup>215</sup>

In 2013, there was 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.<sup>216</sup> 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.<sup>217</sup> 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.

In the first few years after Kim’s death, the North Korean media’s treatment of Jang Song-taek was 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.<sup>218</sup> 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 suggested, it was a shadow government which gave 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).

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<sup>215</sup> 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.

<sup>216</sup> Author’s interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

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

<sup>218</sup> “Report on Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau of the Workers Party of Korea Central Committee,” *KCBS*, 4 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."<sup>219</sup>



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 was not much information, but a great deal of speculation. His responsibility seemed to center on ensuring that existing policies (already established by a Supreme Leader decision) were executed and

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

the appropriate oversight and follow-up were carried out.<sup>220</sup> He interacted with the various policy task forces, making decisions that are required to keep policies on track.<sup>221</sup> 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 was probably too much to expect that Kim Jong-un could carry out this role while still learning how to manage the regime's politics.<sup>222</sup> To ensure that Kim was informed on this process, he received reports from all sectors of the government, Party, military, and security services.<sup>223</sup> With the possible exception of military reports, Jang received these reports first. He was allegedly allowed to provide comment on them and even work with Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat to prioritize them. However, he was not allowed to change anything in the reports.<sup>224</sup> If a Supreme Leader decision was needed to either embark on a new pol-

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

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

<sup>222</sup> There were some indications, however, that Kim Jong-un himself on occasion (maybe through Jang Song-taek) established 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).

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> 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 reflected 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.

icy line or deconflict policy options, Jang Song-taek would presumably advise his 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) was still in place. This would suggest that all documents carried Kim Jong-un's, not Jang Song-taek's, signature—a vital practice to ensure the legitimacy of the *Suryong* system.<sup>225</sup>

With Jang Song-taek's purge, the role of the "Control Tower" presumably has returned to the offices of the Supreme Leader. The implications of this shift on decision-making will be discussed in the epilogue.

## Where strategic level decisions are made

While the "Control Tower" could handle the day-to-day affairs of the regime, there were times early in Kim Jong-un's rule when the regime needed to make course corrections or lay down new strategic guidance. This was a decision only the Supreme Leader could make. When these occasions arose, as suggested above, Kim Jong-un most likely met with one or more of his regents, who could 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 likely grow in number.<sup>226</sup> 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

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<sup>225</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>226</sup> 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.

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.

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.<sup>227</sup> 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

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<sup>227</sup> 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.

each meeting, the agenda is set by Kim's Personal Secretariat in consultation with his closest advisors. Before his aunt's illness and his uncle's execution, this meeting most likely included Kim Kyong-hui, Choe Yong-nim (or Pak Pong-ju), and Jang Song-taek. A combination of these individuals would 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 was an evening dinner which allowed for a more relaxed setting for continued conversation and relationship building.<sup>228</sup> It should be stressed, these were not decision-making meetings. Kim Jong-un made decisions outside of the context of these meetings.<sup>229</sup>

- **Tuesday Meeting.** The meeting on Tuesday focused 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. This role presumably moved to Pak Pong-ju when he became Premier in 2013. 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 included individuals with relevant and critical portfolios inside the Party and government. From the Party, regular invitees likely included: 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 included: the Premier, vice premiers, relevant ministers, relevant SPA leadership, and the head of the State Planning Commission.<sup>230</sup>
- **Friday Meeting.** The meeting on Friday focused on military and security matters, as well as particularly sensitive foreign policy

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<sup>228</sup> Allegedly, the Friday dinner party included participants from both the Tuesday and Friday meetings. Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>229</sup> Author's interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.



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, was responsible for pulling together this meeting and reportedly took the lead in preparing her nephew in a private meeting beforehand (possibly with Jang Song-taek and Kim Kyok-sik). Presumably the Friday meeting included top officials from the Central Military Commission, the National Defense Commission, and the Cabinet. Friday meetings, more so than the Tuesday meetings, also likely took place in a much smaller setting, depending on the sensitivity of the issues under discussion. The 25 January meeting, which was on a Friday, suggested that this may not have been an uncommon occurrence.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> 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.



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

While Jang Song-taek may have been involved in the preparatory meetings before the Tuesday, and possibly the Friday, meeting, defector sources agree, he was not part of either meeting.<sup>232</sup> This would suggest that Kim Jong-un used these meetings as an alternative source

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<sup>232</sup> According to North Korea Intellectuals Solidarity, a meeting of Party, Cabinet, and local government economy-related senior functionaries, was held behind closed doors in North Korea on 8 October 2013 (Tuesday), attended by Kim Jong-un. The meeting was reportedly called at the request of Jang Song-taek to discuss basic ideas and plans for the outward reform of North Korea's economic development.

Jang Song-taek reportedly chaired a plenary session of nationwide economy-related functionaries at this meeting for the first time, and it was interpreted by North Korean cadres as a sign that Jang, with Kim's endorsement, was starting to assume command over state economic development. Since this meeting was held during a period in which Jang was allegedly under investigation, the accuracy of the report remains in question. See "North Korea Embarks on Full-Scale Economic Development with the State Economic Development Committee (Headed by Jang Song-taek) Taking the Lead," *NK Chisigin Yo'ndae*, 31 October 2013.

of information to that which he received from the “Control Tower” channel. They could also have served as a useful venue for Kim to discuss existing policies and receive inputs and advice beyond what he received from his regents. Such a step-by-step education would be vital for Kim to develop the broad knowledge he would 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."<sup>233</sup> 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

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<sup>233</sup> *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.<sup>234</sup>

At the time of this writing, there are a number of Politburo directives that have appeared in the North Korean media,<sup>235</sup> 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.<sup>236</sup> 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

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<sup>234</sup> 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.

<sup>235</sup> 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 4 November 2012, announced its decision to create the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission, headed by Jang Song-taek.

<sup>236</sup> The only account of a Politburo meeting to date is the one that allegedly took place on 15 July 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.<sup>237</sup>

- **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

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<sup>237</sup> 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.<sup>238</sup> 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.<sup>239</sup> 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.

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<sup>238</sup> 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.

<sup>239</sup> 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.”<sup>240</sup> 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.<sup>241</sup> Like the NDC, it is not clear that the CMC meets on a regular basis.

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<sup>240</sup> Author’s interviews in Seoul, April 2013.

<sup>241</sup> 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.<sup>242</sup>

## 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

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<sup>242</sup> 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 3 February 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.<sup>243</sup> 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.<sup>244</sup> 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.<sup>245</sup> 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

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<sup>243</sup> 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).

<sup>244</sup> 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.

<sup>245</sup> 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 conveys an impression of an open, people-friendly, ambitious leader, markedly different from Kim Jong-il's isolationist, solitary, and sequestered image. 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.<sup>246</sup> Defector reporting also paints a picture of a young and impetuous Supreme Leader who is sometimes quick to make decisions without seeking advice.<sup>247</sup> 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.<sup>248</sup> How eager he is to challenge

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<sup>246</sup> 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.

<sup>247</sup> 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.

<sup>248</sup> This observation is based on a series of interviews the author conducted with Pyongyang watchers in Seoul in April 2013. There were some, however, who took the opposite view that Kim Jong-un lacks an understand-

some of these constraints is as yet unclear.<sup>249</sup> His decision to reveal the failure of the Unha-3 missile test in April 2012 may have resulted from his own decision or could have resulted from the fact that he listened to those advisors who advocated transparency given the unprecedented openness leading up to the launch.<sup>250</sup> 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.

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ing of boundaries and is enamored with the power his position affords him.

<sup>249</sup> 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 Panmunjom 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*, 8 July 2013.

<sup>250</sup> According to one Pyongyang watcher, the Kim Jong-un era decision-making has been characterized by an air of improvisation and immaturity. In April 2012, at the time of the long-range missile launch, Pyongyang invited foreign reporters in to show them around the launch site and watch the rocket launch, but then on the day prevented them from viewing the event. Then, having raised tensions in March/April 2013, Kim completely switched directions in May and began an over-the-top diplomatic charm offensive. These, and other events, such as the on-again-off-again family reunions, have led many in Washington and Seoul to conclude that Kim and the North Korean leadership lacks a strategic plan are buffeted by short-term tactical considerations primarily tied to internal pressures. See Ahn Jong-sik, "Time to Take a Step Back on North Korea," *Daily NK*, 8 February 2014. An Jong-sik is the deputy head of the SBS Political Department.



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

Early in his tenure as leader, there was an ongoing debate within Pyongyang watching circles over the extent to which Kim Jong-un was in control of his own public events. While many speculated that he was stage managed, given his obvious mannerisms that appear to be patterned after his grandfather, a photograph that appeared in June 2013 suggested that he may write some of his own speeches. *Nodong Sinmun* published a photograph of Kim delivering a speech at an event in Chagang Province.<sup>251</sup> The notes that Kim was speaking off of were written in blue ink and contained a number of amendments and deletions, which could suggested that this was not an officially generated speech, but one written by Kim himself.<sup>252</sup> The fact that *Nodong Sinmun* did not reproduce the speech in its entirety, even

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<sup>251</sup> 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).

<sup>252</sup> 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.

though it was described as historic, led some to believe that it may have been lacking in propaganda elements precisely because Kim Jong-un did write it. Conversely, others pointed out that it was impossible to say whether Kim really wrote it; rather, they suggested *Nodong Sinmun* was ordered to publicize an image showing the hand-written notes simply because it showed that Kim is a caring leader who strives to better connect with his people.<sup>253</sup>



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

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 advisors, but with powerful institutions, such as the high command.<sup>254</sup> While he appears to be keenly aware of the protocols that need to be observed and to understand the boundaries

<sup>253</sup> "Kim's Hand-written Speech Sparks Debate," *Daily NK*, 24 June 2013.

<sup>254</sup> 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 24 June). 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 24 June were related to the military.

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.<sup>255</sup> 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 advisors 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 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.

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<sup>255</sup> 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.*



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.<sup>256</sup> Particular attention will be paid to what this new line says about the

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<sup>256</sup> 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*, 1 April 2013.



new regime's flexibility.<sup>257</sup> 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,<sup>258</sup> which he dictated to his sister and executor of the will, Kim Kyong-hui, in the months before his death.<sup>259</sup> In the will, Kim Jong-il laid out a policy prescription for North Korea that was to be adhered to by his successor, Kim Jong-un. These prescriptions covered 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,<sup>260</sup> this document can provide useful indicators and signposts for any Pyongyang watcher seek-

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<sup>257</sup> 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.

<sup>258</sup> 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.

<sup>259</sup> One source of Kim Jong-il's will was 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.

<sup>260</sup> 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 country” (*gangsungdaeguk*) 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."<sup>261</sup> 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-

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<sup>261</sup> "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.<sup>262</sup> 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.<sup>263</sup>

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.<sup>264</sup> 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-

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<sup>262</sup> *Nodong Sinmun*, 30 May 2012.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>264</sup> 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.<sup>265</sup>

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.<sup>266</sup> 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,<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> 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.

<sup>266</sup> Kim’s 6 April statement was carried in the 19 April edition of *Nodong Sinmun*.

<sup>267</sup> 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,<sup>268</sup> thus theoretically enhancing the incentive for farmers to grow more produce resulting in an overall increase in the country's agricultural output.<sup>269</sup>

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.<sup>270</sup> 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-

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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.

<sup>268</sup> 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).

<sup>269</sup> 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.

<sup>270</sup> 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.<sup>271</sup> Large "central enterprises," such as munitions plants will continue to be run under a state strategic plan and adhere to the rationing system.<sup>272</sup>

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.<sup>273</sup> 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.<sup>274</sup> Viewed from this per-

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<sup>271</sup> Cho Min, "The New Economic Policies in North Korea Under the Leadership of Kim Jong-un," op. cit.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> 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.

<sup>274</sup> That said, Kim Jong-un has taken some economic measures to ease the plight of the general population, such as alleviating market control, ex-

spective, North Korea's economic revival is not based on large scale revamping of the system, but tweaking around the edges. And for it to 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.<sup>275</sup> 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

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panding rations, and stabilizing food prices. See Park Young-ja, "Kim Jong-un's Ruling Style and Structure," *KINU Online Series*, February 2014.

<sup>275</sup> 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.



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 ethnocentric 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 mili-

tary-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.<sup>276</sup>

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.<sup>277</sup> But as it has shifted

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<sup>276</sup> 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, 1 April 2013.

<sup>277</sup> 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

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.<sup>278</sup> 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.<sup>279</sup>

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 psy-

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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 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.

<sup>278</sup> 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.

<sup>279</sup> Alexandre Mansourov, "North Korea: Enduring Short-Term Pain for Long-Term Gain," *op. cit.*

che. For its leadership, the war has never ended and for that reason, the regime can never let down its guard.

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 em-

phasized the importance of the relationship to North Korea's survival. 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.<sup>280</sup>

A cursory examination of Kim Jong-un's first year in power suggested that he was adhering to the boundaries laid out in his father's will. At the operational level, however, he seemed 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 appeared 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 had on numerous occasions voiced its resolution not to even place its "nuclear deterrent" up for discussion unless it was 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.<sup>281</sup> The decision to tie the nuclear program to Kim Jong-un's name with the announcement of the "*byungjin*" line appeared to have backed North Korea into a corner, leaving no space for diplomacy. This was in keeping with Kim Jong-il's will regarding the sanctity of the nuclear program, but it highlighted an inherent contradiction in the will, which also stresses the need for peaceful

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<sup>280</sup> 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 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of active hostilities of the Fatherland Liberation War (Korean War).

<sup>281</sup> 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.

resolution of North Korea's issues with the international community.

- 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.<sup>282</sup> 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

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<sup>282</sup> 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.

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).

- 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 did not have a good handle on the ultimate policy line (both domestically and externally) the Kim Jong-un regime would follow. Some argued that the actions over this period meant that the regime had not changed its ways and Kim Jong-un would continue the policies pursued by his father, alternating between crisis management and diplomacy to secure what aid it could from the international community. Others believed that at his core, Kim Jong-un, who has experienced the outside world and is of a different generation, would ultimately pursue reform, albeit limited and with North Korean characteristics. Still others believed that the system was fatally flawed and Kim Jong-un could 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.



ship. Analysis of the impact of Jang Song-taek's purge on North Korean policymaking will be considered in the epilogue.

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.<sup>283</sup> 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,<sup>284</sup> which apparently led to blow back in

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<sup>283</sup> This time span was based on an assessment of views throughout the Pyongyang-watching community in the summer of 2013—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.

<sup>284</sup> A decision that might have been in part reversed following the purge of Jang Song-taek. See the epilogue of this paper.

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.<sup>285</sup> As such, this should be considered a red line, at least for the 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.<sup>286</sup>

**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

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<sup>285</sup> 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 guarantee 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.

<sup>286</sup> John Delury, "Pyongyang Perseveres," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (July/August 2013).

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 effort to stabilize his power base as early as possible.<sup>287</sup> 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.<sup>288</sup> But on both

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<sup>287</sup> 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.

<sup>288</sup> 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

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 its nuclear program could be a source of negotiation.<sup>289</sup> 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.<sup>290</sup>

**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

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strategy may have changed in that Pyongyang must now pay attention to Seoul.

<sup>289</sup> 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.

<sup>290</sup> 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.

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*.

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 put North Korea in a difficult position since the North Korean leadership could not 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 advisors 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.<sup>291</sup> While relations may be warming in the aftermath of Vice

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<sup>291</sup> 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.

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 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

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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.

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).<sup>292</sup> In March/April, North Korea self-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.<sup>293</sup> 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

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<sup>292</sup> For a detailed discussion of North Korean calculus regarding provocations and escalation, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Calculus in the Maritime Environment: Covert versus Overt Provocations* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses COP-2013-U-005210, July 2013).

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

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 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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## Epilogue: The purge of Jang Song-taek

This one-year assessment of Kim Jong-un's first year in power was published in September 2013. Three months later, Jang Song-taek, arguably the second most powerful individual in the regime, was purged in an unprecedentedly public and violent manner. This surprising move by the regime sparked widespread speculation within the Pyongyang watching community. Why was Jang purged? What drove the timing for this decision? Why was the purge handled in the fashion that it was? What are the implications for regime stability and leadership dynamics? What are the implications for policy? This epilogue to the paper, which updates the information to a full two years after Kim Jong-un came to power, will address these questions. It will lay out what happened and present some scenarios that may explain why it happened. Unfortunately, only time will reveal many of the answers. Therefore, this chapter should be considered a snapshot in time designed to capture initial impressions and potential consequences of this momentous event.

### The purge

On 9 December, one day after the event, the North Korean media carried a lengthy report of an enlarged meeting of the Politburo at which the decision was made to dismiss Jang Song-taek from all of his positions, including as a member of the Politburo itself and as vice chairman of the National Defense Commission. The Politburo also removed Jang from the Korean Workers' Party. In unusually harsh language, the Politburo report stated:

The Party served warning to Jang several times and dealt blows at him, watching his group's anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional acts as it has been aware of them from long ago. But Jang did not pay heed to it but went beyond tolerance limit. That was why the Party eliminated Jang and purged his group.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> *Nodong Sinmun*, 9 December 2013.



Senior DPRK officials observe Jang’s removal from the 8 December 2013 Politburo meeting. (Photo: KCTV screen grab)

In a departure from past handling of leadership purges, the media not only provided in explicit detail the litany of indictments against Jang,<sup>295</sup> but also provided photographs of him being arrested and forcefully removed from the Politburo meeting.<sup>296</sup> Not since the 1950s and Kim Il-sung’s purges of factional elements within the leadership had the media used such language (“anti-Party and counterrevolutionary factional acts”) to describe a leader’s political crimes.<sup>297</sup> As for listing the crimes in their totality and publicly airing them, this purge was unprecedented.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> The indictments were not confined to political indiscretions, as has been the practice in the past when ranking officials were brought to task, but strayed beyond politics to include many salacious descriptions of his “dissolute and depraved life.” It cited examples of his womanizing, drinking, drug use, and squandering foreign currency in foreign casinos.

<sup>296</sup> KCTV on 9 December aired two photographs of Jang’s arrest—something unprecedented in North Korean media treatment of a fallen senior official, let alone a member of the Kim family.

<sup>297</sup> In August 1953, the KWP’s Sixth Central Committee Plenum accused Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Pak Hon-yong of being a “factionalist” who led a “clique of anti-party, and anti-state spies” for the United

Three days later, on 12 December, the media reported that a “special military tribunal” of the Ministry of State Security had tried Jang Song-taek on charges of perpetuating a “state subversive plot.”<sup>299</sup> The court sentenced Jang to death pursuant to “Article 60 of the Republic’s criminal code,” and his sentence was carried out immediately after the trial.<sup>300</sup> The readout from the trial was even harsher than that of the expanded Politburo meeting. In language normally reserved for the regime’s most vitriolic diatribes against South Korean leaders, the trial readout accused Jang of having “impeded the work of establishing the Party’s monolithic leadership system.” It referred to him as an “unparalleled traitor for all ages” and “an ugly human scum worse than a dog.” Unlike the more restrained Politburo report, which referred to Jang Song-taek by his full name, the trial indictment re-

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States. He was removed from the Party and put on trial. See *Nodong Sinmun*, 11 August 1953.

<sup>298</sup> The only other senior official publicly removed under somewhat questionable circumstances during Kim Jong-un’s tenure had been Ri Yong-ho. While some rumors contended that he was also removed from his positions at a Politburo meeting, the media only announced that he had retired due to illness. The reference to Ri as a “comrade” in the dismissal announcement was a sign of respect, although speculation was that he had been forced to retire and may even be under house arrest. See “Ri Yong-ho ‘Relieved’ of All Posts at 15 July Party Meeting,” Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station, 15 July 2012.

<sup>299</sup> In the history of the regime, the North Korean media have only reported on two other trials of senior leaders. Both were military tribunals that took place in the 1950s as Kim Il-sung struggled to eliminate factionalism within the ranks of the leadership. Following Pak Hon-yong’s removal from the Party in 1953, he was remanded over to a “special trial of the Supreme Court,” which was presided over by VMAR Choe Yong-kon, the minister of defense. *Nodong Sinmun* provided an account of the trial in 1955. Also in 1953, Ri Sung-yop, a KWP secretary, was put on trial for carrying out a “subversive plot against the Republic and espionage against the state” for the United States. While Pak was sentenced to death, the execution of his sentence was never reported. *Nodong Sinmun* reported in August 1953 that Ri and others were executed soon after the verdict.

<sup>300</sup> Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station, 12 December 2013.

ferred to him over 20 times as a “bastard.”<sup>301</sup> *Nodong Sinmun*’s report of the special military tribunal (which appeared on page 2) contained two additional photographs: one of the tribunal judges; and the other of a handcuffed Jang, forced to bow his head by guards on either side of him.



Jang Song Taek appears before a tribunal of the Ministry of State Security on 12 December 2013. (Photo: *Nodong Sinmun*)

## Reason(s) for the purge

At no time in the 65-year history of the North Korean regime had such a purge of a senior leader, let alone someone tied to the Kim family, been carried out in such a public fashion. At the time of this writing, the Pyongyang watching community is awash in speculation and theories of what happened—something spurred on by the litany of crimes attached to Jang Song-taek at both the Politburo meeting, where he was stripped of his positions, and the special military tribunal, which confirmed his guilt and passed judgment (execution) on him. South Korea’s National Intelligence Service has spoken on the matter. At least two theories have emerged from the North Korean defector community. The Pyongyang-watching community has not reached a consensus on what sparked the purge, subscribing to sev-

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<sup>301</sup> “DPRK Ministry of State Security Holds ‘Special Military Tribunal’ For Jang Song-taek,” KCNA, 12 December 2013.

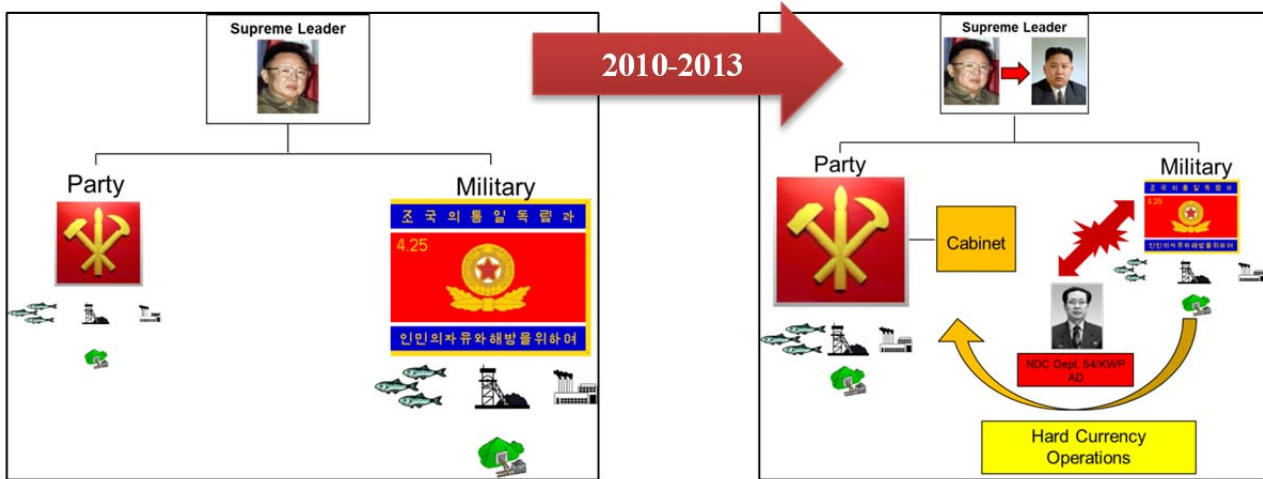
eral causal factors. Below are the leading theories, each of which carries with it implications for Kim Jong-un's power and the near-term stability of the regime.

**Jang's monopolization of resources reached a tipping point.** This is the theory that has been put forth by many Pyongyang watchers, including those in South Korea's National Intelligence Service. According to disparate accounts being pieced together by the NIS and "American officials," the purge was related not to a power struggle per se, but to disputes surrounding profitable hard currency operations<sup>302</sup>—which Jang Song-taek and his supporters had increasingly come to monopolize, much to the consternation of other forces within the regime. The precipitating event that eventually led to Jang's purge, however, is in question.

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<sup>302</sup> It is important to keep in mind that the era of largess that existed in the early Kim Jong-il era has given way to a period in which the North Korean leadership is increasingly responsible for generating hard currency for the regime. This has placed access to foreign funding streams at a premium and, consequently, increased the tension among key players around the Supreme Leader.

Jang had apparently amassed nearly 1 billion dollars from his foreign currency-earning operations, which were deposited in the Bank of Shanghai. Not only did Jang and his associates mishandle these funds, which led to the bank shutting down the account, but Jang failed to transfer the required kickback from these funds into the Supreme Leader's coffers. See Robert Collins, "North Korea's Theater of the Absurd and the New Number Two's," *War on the Rocks*, 13 February 2014.



These charts portray the shift in the flow of hard currency from the Songun (Military First) period under Kim Jong-il to the Kim Jong-un era. Jang Song-taek was a prime mover behind this shift.

One account of the events holds that in September, a firefight took place along the country's southwestern coast over who would profit from North Korea's most lucrative exports—clams, crabs, and coal.<sup>303</sup> Acting on Kim Jong-un's orders, North Korean military forces were deployed to retake control of one source of those exports, the seafood farms that Jang Song-taek had seized from the military when he became the vice chairman of the National Defense Commission. In the battle for control of the farms, the emaciated, poorly trained North Korean forces were beaten badly – by Jang's loyalists. When Kim learned of the rout, he was outraged that his orders had been ignored by the Fisheries Office responsible for these resources. He sent a larger force to the area, which enforced his will. The investigation that followed led to the execution in late November of two of Jang's top lieutenants: Ri Ryong-ha and Jang Su-gil, the first vice di-

<sup>303</sup> In testimony to the South Korean parliament, the director of the NIS, Nam Jae-joon, explained that “Jang intervened too much in lucrative state businesses...related to coal, which drew mounting complaints from other (related) state bodies...Kim Jong-Un was briefed about it... and issued orders to correct the situation. But many officials loyal to Jang [Ri Ryong-ha and Jang Su-gil] did not immediately accept his orders [saying they first needed to check with Jang Song-taek], which eventually led an angry Kim to launch a sweeping purge.” “N. Korea purge sparked by mineral disputes: Seoul official,” AFP, 23 December 2013. See also “Korea Execution is Tied to Clash Over Businesses,” *New York Times*, 23 December 2013.

rector and vice director of the KWP Administrative Department, respectively.<sup>304</sup> Days later, Jang himself was arrested, publicly denounced, and finally executed.



Ri Ryong-ha (left) and Jang Su-gil are reported to have been publicly executed in November (2013) as part of a purge of political figures close to Jang Song-taek.

Another account, which emerged from NIS testimony before the South Korean parliament and may be part of the story outlined above, is also tied to the military as being the aggrieved party. Less dramatic and apparently more procedural, this account contends that after touring several military units and learning of shortages in daily necessities, Kim Jong-un ordered the NDC's Department 54,<sup>305</sup> which is in charge of supplying critical supplies (e.g., electricity, coal, fuel, and clothes) to the military, to deal with the matter. The department, which was headed by Jang Su-gil,<sup>306</sup> failed to comply with

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<sup>304</sup> Later reporting claimed that Pak Chun-hong, another vice director of the KWP Administrative Department, was also executed. This same reporting claimed that Ri Myong-su, the former minister of People's Security, had been either placed under house arrest or executed.

<sup>305</sup> Department 54 previously was subordinated to the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, but was moved to the NDC after Jang Song-taek became a vice chairman in 2010.

<sup>306</sup> Other sources contend that Jang Su-gil was not the director of Department 54, but had jurisdiction over the Fisheries Office, which was attached to the department. It was this office that refused to admit a



this order.<sup>307</sup> When word got back to Kim, he ordered a probe into the matter, which took place in October. The probe discovered that Department 54 had burgeoned well beyond a military supplier and now owned department stores in Pyongyang and Wonsan as well as controlling mines, power plants, cement factories, and agricultural distribution networks throughout North Korea—many of which were implicated in corruption. The findings of the probe led to Kim’s decision to purge his uncle and neuter his network—the planning for which was carried out by his half-sister, Kim Sol-song, and her husband, Sin Pok-nam.<sup>308</sup>

This account points to the trigger for Jang’s purge as being the growing friction within the regime over the power of his fiefdom, housed mainly within the KWP Administrative Department.<sup>309</sup> In the absence of a strong Supreme Leader, alliance building began within the leadership, which led to the eventual coalition of the KWP Organization Guidance Department, the military, and the Ministry of State Security against Jang Song-taek and his apparatus. According to this account, the OGD and Choe Ryong-hae had direct access to Kim Jong-un and could express the frustration of the Party and military. The fact that the Ministry of State Security had suffered several purges of senior officials at the hands of Jang predisposed Kim Won-hong to join this tripartite coalition, creating the critical mass needed to blunt Jang’s

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military investigation unit sent on order by Kim Jong-un. It is interesting to note that soon after Jang’s execution, Kim Jong-un inspected a military fisheries office and commended the staff, a possible signal to the wider North Korean leadership on the need to heed his directives. See “3-Party Coalition of Party, Military, and Secret Police Behind Jang’s Purge,” *Sankei Shimbun*, 5 January 2014.

<sup>307</sup> According to one account, the Department 54 secretary began reporting secretly to the General Political Bureau about Jang’s activities. Choe Ryong-hae reported Jang’s activities to Kim Jong-un, which sparked the investigation. See Robert Collins, “North Korea’s Theater of the Absurd and the New Number Two’s,” *op. cit.*

<sup>308</sup> “Purge of Jang Song-taek Triggered by Supply Corruption,” *Choson Ilbo*, 24 December 2013.

<sup>309</sup> One of the indictments against Jang Song-taek was that he had contrived to make the KWP Administrative Department into a “small kingdom that no one could touch.”

effort to respond. When Jang eventually learned of the plot to get rid of him, he allegedly sought a meeting with Kim Jong-un, which was blocked—whether by this coalition or by the Kim Sol-song apparatus is not clear.<sup>310</sup>

These accounts suggest that Jang’s purge was about control over hard currency operations, something that has become increasingly important in the cash-strapped regime. While these stories account for the growing tension among the leaders around Kim Jong-un, they provide thin reasoning for the timing of the purge of Jang himself. They suggest two theories as to regime dynamics: either Kim is now being increasingly influenced by a different set of political actors (presumably Choe Ryong-hae and possibly Kim Won-hong), who saw it as being to their own benefit to upend the regent system by removing Jang Song-taek; or Kim is a more mercurial figure than previously understood, who was growing increasingly frustrated by his “handlers” and found an excuse to break free from the constraints of the regent system.<sup>311</sup> These accounts do little to explain the reasoning behind the extensive list of crimes arraigned against Jang—focusing

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<sup>310</sup> In the aftermath of Jang’s purge, Kim Jong-un has allegedly strengthened his control over the regime’s coffers. According to defector sources, he ordered a restructuring of the lines of control over hard currency operations, placing his younger sister, Kim Yo-jong, in charge of several operations: Department 54; the Taesong Bank and the Reunification and Development Bank (under Office 39); the Taehung Management Bureau and Kimgang Management Bureau (under Office 38); and the Kyonghung Guidance Bureau and Rakwon Guidance Bureau, which used to be controlled by Kim Kyong-hui. The military received nearly 30 trading companies, many of which had been removed from its control after the purge of Ri Yong-ho and placed under the Cabinet. See “Kim Jong-un’s Sister Put in Charge of Regime’s Coffers,” *Chosun Ilbo*, 13 January 2014.

<sup>311</sup> According to some Pyongyang watchers, Kim Jong-un’s decision to execute Jang and his aides is indicative of his impromptu decision-making style. Over the last two years, Kim has taken stern measures on a number of occasions, sometimes following what appears to have been rushed decision-making. These “excessive measures” could be the result of a young leader’s attempts to rule through fear and intimidation. See “Kim Jong-un’s ‘Politics of Terror;’ Impromptu, Impulsive Decision-making Style,” *Dong-A Ilbo Online*, 06 December 2013.

on two of the crimes: squandering precious resources, and ignoring the edicts of the Supreme Leader.

**Jang represented a second power center that needed to be removed.**

This theory emerged from the North Korean defector community soon after Jang Song-taek was expelled from all his posts at the expanded meeting of the Politburo. According to this account, which focuses on the Kim family's role in the purge, Jang's removal was preordained in Kim Jong-il's will, which warned the heir apparent (Kim Jong-un) against "sectarianism" and laid out the strategy for securing the third generational transition of power. Jang Song-taek represented a potential rival center of power that would only grow over time until his presence behind the throne would be immovable.<sup>312</sup>

In this account, Jang's removal was an eventuality.<sup>313</sup> The question was not *whether* he would be removed, but *when* he would be removed. For

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<sup>312</sup> According to one Pyongyang watcher, the indictment against Jang Song-taek provides clues that he may have been plotting behind the scenes to undermine Kim Jong-un's legitimacy in the eyes of the wider leadership. If this is true, he was becoming a cancer that Kim could not abide. The Pyongyang watcher raises several tempting pieces of circumstantial evidence to support this theory. The escalation crisis in the spring of 2013 may have given Jang, who is rumored to have counseled against engaging in this provocative activity, the opportunity to criticize Kim Jong-un's leadership skills by threatening the security of the country for no real gain. The shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex during that crisis (April 9) could have provided Jang with an opportunity to blame his nephew for the souring of inter-Korean economic relations, something the regime vitally needed. The sex scandal with Kim's wife, Ri Sol-ju, could have provided Jang, who may have been the source of the rumors, with an opportunity to call the morals of the Supreme Leader into question. The sinking of the two North Korean navy ships during an exercise could have given Jang proof with which to criticize Kim's skills as a commander-in-chief. While these are nothing more than allegations, they suggest the types of activities Jang Song-taek might have been engaged in if he were actively trying to undermine Kim Jong-un's leadership. See Alexandre Mansourov, "North Korea: Leadership Schisms and Consolidation During Kim Jong-un's Second Year in Power," *38 North*, 22 January 2014.

<sup>313</sup> Although an eventuality, Jang's demise, according to some Pyongyang watchers, was hastened by his wanton disregard of Kim Jong-un's orders, especially in how he handled the China portfolio. In August 2012, Kim

Kim Jong-un to fully assume the role of the Supreme Leader, Jang would have to be pushed aside and his role as Control Tower claimed by Kim himself. The purge was allegedly accelerated because of Kim Kyong-hui's declining health. She was the guarantor of the Kim family equities within the regime and had engineered her nephew's consolidation up to this point, even laying the ideological foundation through the revision of the "Ten Principles for a Monolithic Ideological System" into the "Ten Principles for a Monolithic Leader Ideological System," which tightened the rationale for continued Kim family rule. Increasingly incapacitated by health issues and possibly the onset of Alzheimer's disease, Kim Kyong-hui supported Kim Jong-un's decision in August 2012 to carry out an investigation into Jang's expanding network of power.<sup>314</sup> Conducted by the KWP Organization

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Jong-un sent Jang Song-taek as a special envoy to China to seek support for North Korea's nuclear program. Instead, Jang focused on boosting bilateral business with China and drawing investment into the special economic zones—things that would enhance his power within the regime. When Kim found out, he began to shift his support within the regent apparatus to Choe Ryong-hae, who acted as his envoy in May 2013. Other Pyongyang watchers contend that it was not Jang's focus in his meetings with the Chinese leadership that ultimately undermined his position with regard to the Supreme Leader. Instead, it was the OGD's efforts to ensure that Jang's agreements with the Chinese bore no fruit, thus dooming Jang as incompetent and unable to deliver on economic policy. See "A Full Account of the Purge of Jang Song-taek," *Monthly Chosun Online*, 1 January 2014, and "Jang's Downfall Started in 2012," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 14 February 2014.

<sup>314</sup> Soon after Jang's execution, stories began to appear in the South Korean media speculating on Kim Kyong-hui's health. Anonymous government officials suggested that her health condition was critical (even though the NIS initially denied that her health situation had changed). One unnamed U.S. intelligence official reportedly claimed that she had undergone brain surgery in Paris and had recently descended to a vegetative state, presumably after giving her "tacit agreement" to purge her husband. According to Kim Jang-soo, President Park's national security chief, starting in early 2013, Kim's health has been getting increasingly worse, and she is now in critical condition, reportedly in a coma, but she has not died. See "Kim Kyong-hui in Coma, Says Intelligence Source," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 8 January 2014. More recent reporting even suggests that Kim Kyong-hui has left the country and may be receiving treatment in Europe—either in Poland or in Switzerland. Finally, according to one senior defector, Kim had a stroke in January 2013, but

Guidance Department under the direction of First Vice Directors Kim Kyong-ok and Cho Yon-jun and Vice Director Min Pyong-chol,<sup>315</sup> the investigation lasted 14 months and revealed Jang's efforts dating back to Kim Jong-il's stroke in August 2008 to build a bastion of power throughout the regime separate from that of the Supreme Leader.<sup>316</sup> It also produced evidence that Jang had fabricated documents and manipulated evidence in order to remove his rivals, such as Ri Je-gang and Ri Yong-chul of the KWP Organization Guidance Department. Evidence in hand, Kim Jong-un, with Kim Kyong-hui's acquiescence, entrusted his half-sister and director of his personal secretariat, Kim Sol-song, to develop the strategy for the purge, and his older brother, Kim Jong-chol, to carry it out, which he did in concert with a special task force made up of Guard Command and Ministry of State Security personnel.<sup>317</sup>

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has recovered. She is currently, taking leave from politics. If true, Kim is likely not in a vegetative state, but either is seeking additional medical care or has been forced to leave in the wake of her husband's purge.

<sup>315</sup> One theory purports that the OGD's investigation of Jang Song-taek began in December 2011, soon after Kim Jong-il's death. See "A Full Account of the Purge of Jang Song-taek," *Monthly Chosun Online*, 1 January 2014.

<sup>316</sup> The Politburo readout of 8 December noted, "Jang desperately worked to form a faction within the party by creating illusion about him and winning those weak in faith and flatterers to his side." Furthermore, he tried "to increase his force and build his base for realizing it by implanting those who had been punished for their serious wrongs in the past period into ranks of officials of departments of the party central committee and units under them." Jang also apparently sought to dismantle the personality cult of the Kim dynasty and impede the party campaign to build Kim Jong-un's cult of personality, since the Politburo accused him of "shunning and obstructing in every way the work for holding President Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il in high esteem for all ages."

<sup>317</sup> See "Jang Song-taek's Purge was Expected Long Ago," NKSIS website, 10 December 2013, and "Kim Jong-un and His Brother Kim Jong-chol Picked Their Uncle Jang Song-taek as Prey to Maintain the Kim Dynasty Regime in North Korea," NKSIS website, 10 December 2013.



Kim Kyong-hui (far left) makes a final appearance as part of the reviewing stand for a military parade of the Worker-Peasant Red Guard Forces and a Pyongyang mass rally at Kim Il-sung Square to commemorate the 65<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of the DPRK. (Photo: KCTV screen grab, 9 September 2013)

This theory accounts for the fact that Kim Kyong-hui has not been seen in public since September. It also could explain why she appeared on the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee (in sixth place) but did not later appear at the memorial ceremonies commemorating the second anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death. It suggests that Jang's purge was more a Kim family affair aimed at preserving Kim Jong-un as the source of legitimacy than some power struggle within the North Korean leadership writ large. The Politburo report condemned Jang for not following Kim's orders.<sup>318</sup> While the theory explains some of the more personal aspects of the indictment against Jang (womanizing, etc.) and the most serious charge of undermining

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<sup>318</sup> Jang reportedly opposed Kim's policy of making state-run companies more financially independent, saying it was premature to do so. This difference of opinion, and Jang's lack of willingness to carry out economic policy that Kim had signed off on, probably would have incurred the Supreme Leader's wrath. See "Kim Concentrates Power in His Hands," *Japan News*, 10 December 2013. Some South Korean analysts suggest a different spin on the policy disagreement. They assert that Jang advocated a forceful push for a broad and deep Chinese-style economic reform and wide opening, while moderating the country's nuclear and space ambitions. This position put him at odds with Kim Jong Un's "byungjin line" and traditionalist hardliners seeking to limit any reform while prioritizing a strong defense. "Jang's Economic Policy Hangover," *Daily NK*, 4 December 2013.

the unitary leadership of the Party, as well as the intense media focus on the Mt. Paektu bloodline in the aftermath of Jang's execution, it does not explain why Kim Jong-un would potentially subvert the legitimacy of the Kim family by airing its dirty laundry in public. If the purge was a Kim family matter designed to preserve Kim Jong-un's legitimacy, why publicly admit that the regime had known of Jang's indiscretions and crimes (admonishing him on several occasions) and done nothing about them sooner?

**Jang lost out in a power struggle.** Two theories suggest that Kim Jong-un was only the sanctioning authority of Jang's purge following a power struggle that left his uncle politically wounded and perilously vulnerable. The first theory made its debut early on in 2013 when the ranking of cohorts accompanying Kim Jong-un on his guidance inspections radically shifted. Jang, who led the cohorts in 2012, was surpassed by Choe Ryong-hae,<sup>319</sup> leading to speculation that Jang's grip on power was slipping. In addition, Choe's profile in 2013 began to rise: not only did he conduct inspections on his own, but he, not Jang, visited China in May (Kim Jong-un's first envoy) following two months of tension on the peninsula.

While this theory has been a favorite among segments of the Pyongyang-watching community, it is based solely on a straight-line reading of the North Korean media and speculating on why Choe's profile dramatically increased after the Fourth Party Conference and continues to rise in the aftermath of Jang's purge. No rumors have surfaced detailing the power struggle other than that Choe may have secured the support of the high command to push back against the Jang network within the military. The fact that Choe Ryong-hae sat to Kim Jong-un's left during the 8 December Politburo meeting and has been a ubiquitous presence since Jang's purge adds credence to the argument that he may have at least benefitted from Jang's demise. That said, many Pyongyang watchers do not believe that Choe is a powerful political operative, although he now seemingly enjoys a closer relationship with Kim Jong-un. On the contrary, they see him

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<sup>319</sup> VMAR Choe Ryong-hae, director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army, was mentioned 150 times in association with Kim Jong-un's inspections, while Jang Song-taek, who accompanied Kim most often in 2012, appeared only 56 times.

as a political opportunist who will never be as powerful as Jang Song-taek. In the end, that may be to his benefit in a system where Kim Jong-un is seeking to consolidate all power in the hands of the Supreme Leader.

**North Korea was witness to a coup d'état.** The second theory of Jang Song-taek as the victim of a power struggle is much darker and highly speculative. It is the continuation of a long-running argument emerging from a segment of the North Korean defector community that contends that Jang's purge was the eventual outcome of a long running battle with the KWP Organization Guidance Department (OGD) that stretches back at least to 2010, if not further.

This theory finds its genesis in how Kim Jong-il ran the regime, through competition between powerful institutions and individuals. As soon as Jang returned from exile in 2007 to take the directorship of the KWP Administrative Department, he became involved in a power struggle with the KWP Organization Guidance Department, which manifested itself in the turf battles between the Ministry of People's Security (backed by Jang) and the State Security Department (backed by the OGD). Following Kim's stroke in 2008, this rivalry intensified and, according to rumor, led to the death of Ri Je-gang in a "staged" car accident in 2010, something that enhanced Jang's power.<sup>320</sup>

As Jang's power continued to grow, the OGD began to join forces with powerful elements within the military and even with Choe Ryong-hae, who had aspirations to push Jang aside and become the premier regent for Kim Jong-un. The OGD used its power of vetting leadership appointments to blunt Jang and Kim Kyong-hui's roles as regents. According to this theory, the OGD slowly began to narrow the channels of access to the heir apparent, including controlling his bodyguards. It also laid out a strategy to identify Jang Song-taek as a "side-branch" that needed to be removed.<sup>321</sup> In the past, when Kim

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<sup>320</sup> This version of Jang's demise is spelled out in detail in a series of reports (all published in December 2013) on the *New Focus International* website.

<sup>321</sup> According to this theory, the OGD was able to gain traction with Kim Jong-il by arguing that Jang was a "side-branch," which led to his purge on two occasions. See "The Transformation of N. Korean Politics



Jong-il was leader, the position of the Supreme Leader was powerful enough to allow Jang to continue to live and eventually return to the center of politics. Under Kim Jong-un, that is no longer the case: the younger Kim either became hostage to the eventual desire of the OGD, or knew he would risk real instability if Jang were allowed to go on living and his patronage system continue to thrive albeit in stasis until its patron could return.

This theory is an outlier in that it suggests that the OGD, not the Supreme Leader, is the locus of power within the regime. Accordingly, the department's two first vice directors, Jo Yon-jun and Kim Kyong-ok, hold the reins of executive power—and, now, with Kim Jong-il's death,<sup>322</sup> the OGD in this scenario has eclipsed the Kim family, leaving Kim Jong-un nothing more than a puppet.<sup>323</sup>

This theory provides an explanation for the overt nature of Jang's purge and the eclectic collection of indictments against him. This is not Kim Jong-un's condemnation of his uncle, but the condemnation of Jang Song-taek by numerous leaders who had suffered in the past at his hands—by individuals who had watched his crimes over the years and only now found the opportunity to strike back. The theory could also explain why the regime would allow Jang's purge to be so public, which besmirched the Kim family brand and may have undermined Kim Jong-un's own legitimacy. The Politburo report accused Jang of failing “to submit to the organizational will of the Party”

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Through the Execution of Jang Song-taek,” *New Focus International*, 20 December 2013.

<sup>322</sup> Hwang Pyong-so, Min Pyong-chol, and Kim In-gol are the OGD vice directors. According to some accounts, Jo Yon-jun and Min Pyong-sol—who allegedly assumed control over the OGD after the deaths of Ri Jegang and Ri Yong-chul in 2010—were the masterminds behind the purge of Jang Song-taek. See “A Full Account of the Purge of Jang Song-taek,” *Monthly Chosun Online*, 1 January 2014.

<sup>323</sup> As the guarantor of Kim Jong-il's power, the OGD began to bring the regime under its control by the late 1970s via a parallel power structure. It ensured that the Kim family stood above all else. Once Kim Jong-il died, there was no other Kim family member who could rein in the OGD. See “We Have Just Witnessed a Coup in North Korea,” *New Focus International*, 27 December 2013.

and “not sincerely accept the Party’s direction and policies.”<sup>324</sup> Mention of the Supreme Leader and his direction of the Party were suspiciously left out of this formulation, suggesting that the purge was engineered by the Party, not Kim Jong-un.<sup>325</sup>

In the absence of more information, this theory will remain on the fringe. It pushes back against conventional wisdom that North Korea is ruled by a *Suryong*-based system where all power and legitimacy flow from the Supreme Leader.<sup>326</sup> It does not explain how such a system would operate since the OGD is primarily concerned with regime survival. Policymaking, both foreign and domestic, would likely grind to a halt in a system that was wholly devoted to power maintenance. In addition, the theory suggests that for now decision-making is based on collective leadership housed within the OGD. Such a decision-making structure is most likely inherently unstable.

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<sup>324</sup> According to some defector analysis, this allegation may have been tied to the ongoing power struggle between Jang Song-taek and the OGD. The OGD had planned a three-stage expansion of Party conventions to be held throughout 2013. This would begin with the KWP Convention of Party Cell Secretaries, and then the KWP Convention of Party Division Secretaries (collections of Party cells make up Party divisions), and finally the KWP Convention of First Party Secretaries (First Party Committees represent all important North Korean institutions and departments)—all a part of a comprehensive campaign of ideological indoctrination of the Party apparatus. Jang objected, noting, “The only way for our people to continue to have faith in the Party is to show with acts, not with empty words.” By May 2013, Kim Jong-un appeared to side with Jang, stating that the Party should go out into the “real world” instead of remaining in their offices and relying on mobilization conferences—a position that undermined OGD efforts to enhance its control over the regime. “Exclusive: specific charges against Jang Song-thaek revealed to Party elite,” *New Focus International*, 2 February 2014.

<sup>325</sup> “We Have Just Witnessed a Coup in North Korea,” *New Focus International*, 27 December 2013.

<sup>326</sup> The proponents of this theory are right in arguing that the power structure in North Korea is not readily apparent to the outside world. Power brokers derived their influence according to an internal system of loyalties to Kim Jong-il. Formal rankings cannot be assumed to be a true reflection of power within the regime.

It is likely that none of these theories entirely captures what took place and why Jang's demise occurred. In fact, there may be elements of truth in all the theories. No doubt Jang was despised by many within the regime, not only because of past power struggles but also because of his control of many of the hard currency operations and his efforts to deny the fruits of these operations to other powerful elements within the regime. Jang also presented a potential threat to the Kim family equities. He was not a direct blood descendent, but his ties to the family allowed him to act with impunity, allegedly to the point of ignoring Kim Jong-un's own edicts. If allowed to remain unchallenged, Jang's power could have metastasized to the point that the regime could not create a counterbalance to him, which would be vital if Kim Jong-un were to fully step into the shoes of Supreme Leader. By November, these forces had coalesced into a decision to remove Jang Song-taek. Only time will tell us what the trigger was and why the purge was conducted in the way it was.

## Implications for regime dynamics and stability

On the surface, Jang's purge, for the time being, appears to have been surgical, removing only a few of his closest aides while leaving the senior leadership largely intact.<sup>327</sup> The North Korean media's handling of the death of Kim Kuk-tae and the second anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death reflects a continuity of the leadership structure centered around Kim Jong-un. This is in keeping with the regime's narrative that Jang's "faction" consisted of only a "handful" of officials. Given the extent of Jang's patronage system, Kim and his advisors likely feared that if the purge moved too quickly and the net was

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<sup>327</sup> That said, defector reporting claims that close to 1,000 associates and family members of Jang Song-taek have been executed since his execution. Allegedly, "purification teams," led by the OGD and State Security Department, were stood up to clean up the remnants of Jang's apparatus. The KWP Administrative Department structure reaches all the way down to the county level, which, on its own, could account for thousands of individuals. See "North Korea's Kim Jong-un Executes 1000 of Jang Song-taek's Associates in 20 Days," *Free North Korea*, 3 January 2014. If this purge comes to pass, the KWP Administrative Department will either cease to exist or be dramatically curtailed. Most of its responsibilities will likely be returned to the KWP Organization Guidance Department.

cast too wide,<sup>328</sup> policymaking could be undermined or the regime could even become destabilized.<sup>329</sup>

## Impact on formal and informal power networks

In terms of the formal leadership structure, the ranking, other than Jang's absence, remains largely unaffected. A comparison of the leadership events surrounding the first anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death in December 2012 and those in 2013 (combined with the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee list) reveals that only a few leaders have significantly moved up or down in the ranking order. Kim Yong-nam, Premier Pak Pong-ju,<sup>330</sup> and Choe Ryong-hae remain at the top of the

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<sup>328</sup> There has been some debate within Pyongyang-watching circles about why the purge, at least at the upper echelons of power, has not been more widespread. While many believe there is a desire on the part of Kim Jong-un and the central Party apparatus not to create instability, another reason may have to do with Kim's power itself. During the Kim Jong-il era, the Supreme Leader's personal ratification was the sole and compulsory prerequisite for execution. After such ratification was obtained, its bearer held the authority of absolute law and could command an execution on the spot, no matter how powerful the target. Under Kim Jong-un, an order from the Supreme Leader may not carry the same weight, leaving cadres more latitude to act on their own initiative. This leaves Kim and the Party with few good choices, which could explain the recent spate of Party Committee meetings designed to indoctrinate and "root out the toxin of Jang Song-taek." The KWP Organization Guidance Department at the beginning of January (2014) declared a campaign to re-examine rosters of Party membership. Central Party cadres were dispatched to each provincial, city, and district Party committee in order to conduct checks into the lives of its members. The pretext was to root out "factional elements." See "N Korean consciousness altered: 'A traitor was found in the Supreme Leader's family,'" *New Focus International*, 4 February 2014.

<sup>329</sup> That said, there are reports that a joint working group made up of the NDC, the KWP Organization Guidance Department, and the Ministry of State Security has been formed to "speedily handle the purge of Jang Song-taek's gang on a nationwide scale." This "anti-faction cleanup team" allegedly takes its orders from OGD First Vice Director Jo Yon-jun. See "Establishment of Group to Purge Jang Song-taek's Aides," *NK Chisingin Yo'ndae*, 19 December 2013.

<sup>330</sup> While much of the media speculation has centered on Choe Ryong-hae, many Pyongyang watchers contend that Kim Yong-nam and Pak Pong-ju

formal leadership rankings behind Kim Jong-un.<sup>331</sup> Choe Yong-nim (the former premier) and Hyon Chol-hae (the former first vice minister of the People's Armed Forces) fell several spots, most likely due to their retired status. Ju Kyu-chang (director of the KWP Defense Industry Department) inexplicably fell six spots since the Founding Anniversary Parade in September 2013. Jo Yon-jun (first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department) and Tae Chong-su (KWP secretary) both rose in the rankings in October and then fell back in December. Officials closely tied to Jang Song-taek, such as Ro Tu-chol (chairman of the State Planning Commission) and Choe Puil (minister of people's security) remained in place—Choe rising in the ranks in October at the Party Anniversary Concert only to fall back in December. It is highly likely that Party and government leadership meetings will take place in the March/April timeframe at which the formal leadership structure of the Kim Jong-un era will be established.

Of particular note is the reemergence of O Kuk-ryol. Even though he played a rather prominent role in the aftermath of Kim Jong-il's death, his role within the leadership has been the source of speculation by Pyongyang watchers, many of whom believed that he had been retired in place even though he was a vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and an alternate member of the Politburo. In September (2013) at the anniversary of the founding of the state, he dramatically jumped several spots in the formal ranking.<sup>332</sup>

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remain two of Kim Jong-un's key advisors. While they occupy the second and third positions in the formal rankings, they are rumored to be key players within the informal power structure. See "Keep an Eye on Premier Pak Pong-ju," *Kyunghyang Shinmun Online*, 19 December 2013.

<sup>331</sup> It is interesting to note the placement of Pak Pong-ju. Although he is only a member of the Politburo, he is ranked with both Kim Yong-nam and Choe Ryong-hae, who are both members of the Politburo Presidium. This suggests Pak's role as one of Kim Jong-un's inner circle of advisors.

<sup>332</sup> This overlaps with Jang Song-taek's disappearance from key leadership meetings. He failed to appear at the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the DPRK (September 8), the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorating Kim Jong-il's election as the KWP General Secretary (7 October), Kim Jong-un's visit to Kumsusan Palace of the Sun (10 October), and Kim's visit to Samjiyon county in Yanggang Province (30 November). His presence was also missed at lower-level military and security events: the fourth meeting of

Two months later, in November, at a national meeting of scientists and technicians, he not only was listed third (behind Pak Pong-ju and Choe Tae-bok) but was the sole representative of the military at a non-military event.<sup>333</sup> On the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee list, he was listed before Kim Won-hong, a full member of the Politburo, suggesting that O may have been elevated from alternate to full member status.



Gen. O Kuk Ryol attends a photo-op with scientists in November 2013. (Photo: *Nodong Sinmun*)

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KPA company commanders and political instructors (22-29 October), which was attended by key individuals in his chain of command (Kim Won-hong and Choe Pu-il); the fourth meeting of active service personnel of KPA for political work with the enemy (12 November); and the second meeting of KPA security personnel (21 November), which was led by Kim Won-hong and Jo Kyong-chol. See Alexandre Mansourov, “North Korea: Leadership Schisms and Consolidation During Kim Jong-un’s Second Year in Power,” *38 North*, 22 January 2014.

<sup>333</sup> A reading of the funeral list would suggest other movement within the Politburo ranks. Ri Yong-gil and Jang Jong-nam appear to have risen to possible alternate membership status while Hyon Chol-hae and Choe Yong-rim may have been demoted from full to alternate status. This is based on analysis done by Michael Madden, the author of the *North Korean Leadership Watch*.

The rise in O Kuk-ryol's profile, which overlaps with the supposed timeframe of Jang's downfall, may not be coincidental. The two were rumored to be rivals. As the patriarch of the powerful O family, one of the leading political families in North Korea, O Kuk-ryol was believed by some Pyongyang watchers to be a counterweight to Jang Song-taek. Their rivalry apparently intensified after Jang became vice chairman of the NDC and began to create a hard currency operation that rivaled the one controlled by O.<sup>334</sup> In the wake of the Third Party Conference and the launch of the succession process, O faded into the background as Jang's profile began to rise. Therefore, it is not surprising that this powerful player would return to prominence in part to fill the political vacuum created by the demise of his rival.

While the impact of Jang's purge on the formal leadership may be barely perceptible and subject to interpretation and reading of tea leaves, the informal networks of power apparently have been more directly impacted, although the extent of that effect is currently unknown. The North Korean media has only mentioned the execution of two members of Jang's "faction," Ri Yong-ha and Jang Su-gil.<sup>335</sup> According to Japanese reporting, which was picked up by the South Korean media, Kim Jong-il's former personal representative and associate of Jang Song-taek, Ri Su-yong (aka Ri Chol), was also executed.<sup>336</sup> There is additional speculation that Kim Jang-son, the direc-

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<sup>334</sup> After entering the NDC as a vice chairman in 2009, O Kuk-ryol created an organization in charge of many military hard currency operations, the Korea International Company, which was ratified by the SPA. This apparently spurred Jang in January 2010 to launch the Korea Taepung group in order to keep O Kuk-ryol in check. Jang also allegedly planted the story in the North Korean media that the activities of the Taepung group were based on orders directly from NDC Chairman Kim Jong-il. See "Comeback of Influential DPRK Official Around Time of Jang Song-taek's Downfall," *JoongAng Ilbo Online*, 26 December 2013.

<sup>335</sup> According to defector reporting, Ri Myong-su, the former minister of People's Security, may have also been executed. He was inexplicably replaced by Choe Pu-il in 2013. Ri was rumored to be very close to Jang Song-taek and his older brother, Jang Song-u. "North Korea's Kim Jong-un Executes 1000 of Jang Song-taek's Associates in 20 Days," *Free North Korea*, 3 January 2014.

<sup>336</sup> Ri Su-yong was appointed North Korean ambassador to Switzerland in 1988 and was guardian to the young Kim Jong-un during his period of

tor of the NDC secretariat, may have also been purged. Although he was one of Kim Jong-un's gatekeepers, he has not been observed in the public media since late November. His ties with Jang Song-taek and Kim Kyong-hui go back to the 1970s. Finally, several North Korean ambassadors with ties to Jang have been recalled and presumably relieved of their posts. These include: Jang Yong-chol, Jang Song-taek's nephew and the ambassador to Malaysia; Jon Yong-Jin, Jang Song-taek's brother-in-law and the ambassador to Cuba; Pak Kwang-chol, the ambassador to Sweden; and Hong Yong, the North's deputy permanent delegate to UNESCO.

As for those who appear to be rising within the informal ranks, the most visible appear to be military officers. At a meeting of security personnel of the People's Army on November 20,<sup>337</sup> which allegedly took place days after Jang's detention and the execution of Ri Pyong-ha and Jang Su-kil, Kim Jong-un was surrounded by six men on the leadership rostrum: VMAR Choe Ryong-hae; Gen. Kim Won-hong; MG Ryom Chol-song (reportedly a vice director of the General Political Bureau); LTG Jo Kyong-chol (the commander of the Military Security Command); LTG Kim Su-gil (the vice minister of People's Armed Forces); and Hwang Pyong-so (the vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department). This is a reflection of where Kim's critical networks within the military currently lie—within those parts of the apparatus dedicated to surveillance, internal security, and propagation of the monolithic leadership model of regime maintenance.<sup>338</sup> Two weeks later, Kim Jong-un, accompanied by the leaders

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overseas study. He is thought to have handled around \$4 billion of Kim Jong-il's hidden funds under the moniker Ri Chol. After returning to North Korea in 2010, Ri took orders from Jang and was charged with attracting foreign capital as the head of the Commission for Joint Venture and Investment. "Ri Su Yong Executed," *Daily NK*, 11 December 2013.

<sup>337</sup> The meeting of military intelligence officials was the first of its kind in nearly two decades. It received wide coverage in the 21 November edition of *Nodong Sinmun*.

<sup>338</sup> Shortly after this meeting, Kim convened a retreat at Samjiyon near Mt. Paektu where he discussed follow-up measures for the Jang case. The attendees included Kim Won-hong; Kim Yang-gon, KWP Secretary and director of the United Front Department; Han Kwang-sang, the director of the KWP Finance and Accounting Department; and Party deputy directors Pak Tae-song, Hwang Pyong-so, Kim Pyong-ho, Hong Yong-chil, and



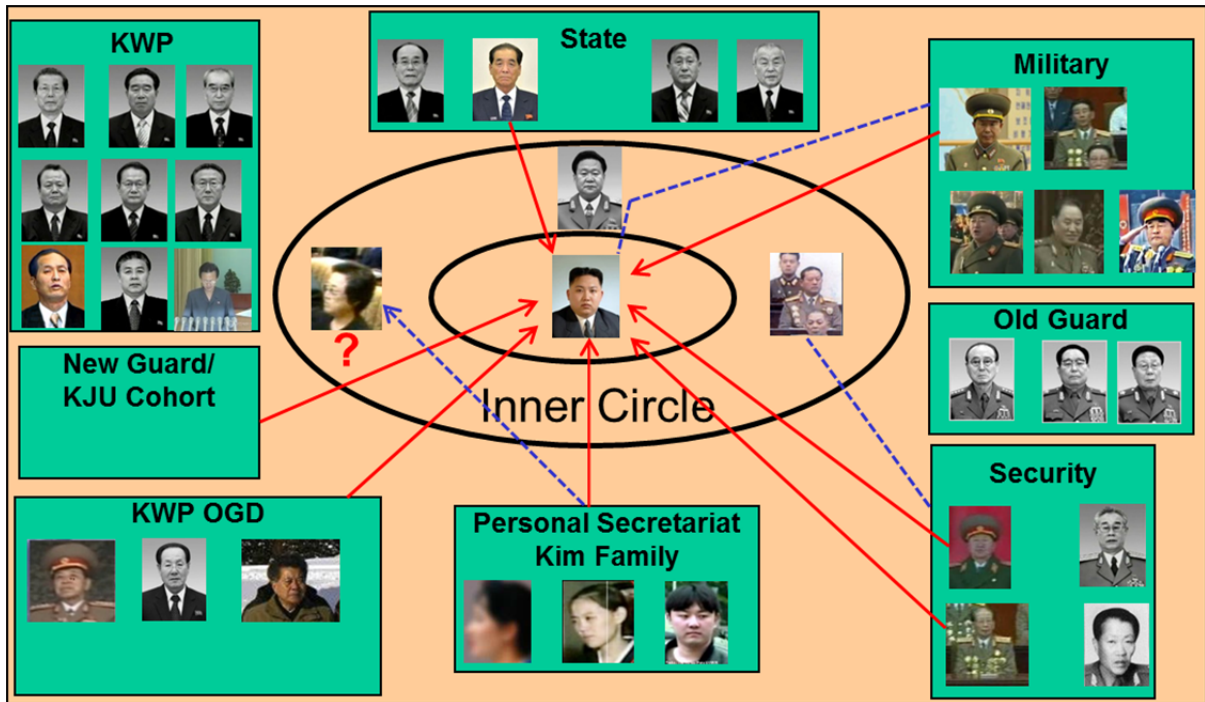
of the high command, paid a special visit to the Kumsusan Palace to commemorate the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong-il's appointment as Supreme Commander. In addition to some familiar names from the past (such as Kim Jong-gak) and some of the long-standing military leaders (Kim Yong-chol, O Kum-chol), the rising stars were on full display: Gen. Ri Yong-gil (chief of the General Staff), Gen. Jang Jong-nam (minister of People's Armed Forces), Pyon In-son (director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau), So Hong-chan (first vice minister of the People's Armed Forces), LTG Kim Su-gil, and MG Ryom Chol-song.<sup>339</sup> Of course, standing to Kim Jong-un's immediate left was VMAR Choe Ryong-hae.<sup>340</sup>

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Ma Won-chun. This meeting been referenced by Pyongyang watchers to identify rising stars within Kim Jong-un's inner circle.

<sup>339</sup> These officers are part of a cadre of 25 senior generals who have been appointed in the Kim Jong-un era. They are mostly specialized in operations and have experience as field commanders. "Report Details North Korea's Rising Stars," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 18 December 2013.

<sup>340</sup> "Choe Solidifies his Power Base," *Korea Times Online*, 24 December 2013. See also *Nodong Sinmun Online*, 24 December 2013.



A notional chart of the formal/informal leadership connections within the regime. The RED lines represent direct connections to Kim Jong-un, while the BLUE lines represent more indirect connections.

According to a South Korean intelligence report, Kim has begun a generational shift across the board, replacing many older figures with relatively younger ones, lowering the average age of the inner circle from 76 to 62.<sup>341</sup> Outside of the military figures mentioned above, four deputy-ministerial-level officials from the Korean Workers’ Party are worth noting: Kim Pyong-ho (vice director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department), Pak Tae-song (vice director of the Organization Guidance Department), Hong Yong-chil (vice director of the Machine Industry Department), and Ma Won-chun (vice director of the Finance and Accounting Department). They have frequently accompanied Kim on his guidance inspections, and he has reportedly praised their work.

### Impact on decision-making

Just as leadership dynamics are evolving in the post Jang Song-taek era, the purge will likely have an impact on North Korean decision-

<sup>341</sup> “Report Details North Korea’s Rising Stars,” *JoongAng Daily Online*, 18 December 2013.

making and policy formulation. If the speculation about Jang being the Control Tower is accurate, his demise will create a huge void in the day-to-day operations of the regime from a policy perspective. According to some defector reporting, Jang served a facilitating role by working with the various government/Party issue groups dedicated to generating policy options. In addition to enforcing consensus around policy options, Jang was responsible for explaining the options to Kim Jong-un in his role as the senior policy advisor. By having Jang serve as the Control Tower, Kim was able to focus his attention more on the power consolidation process. With Jang gone, Kim himself will likely assume the role of Control Tower.<sup>342</sup>

There was speculation in 2012 that Kim Jong-un's Personal Secretariat had begun to assume some of the administrative responsibilities of the Control Tower. Reports surfaced that his secretariat office for economic affairs was developing a "roadmap" that would best position the regime for securing its goal of becoming a strong and prosperous nation by 2020—including concluding a study which began under Kim Jong-il to examine the implications of China's economic revolution. The military office was focused on designing a strategy for enhancing training in the most cost-efficient manner. The ROK Affairs office was tasked with writing a report on a negotiating strategy to elicit South Korean economic support.<sup>343</sup>

The little information available on the personal secretariat's role during this period suggests that it was working in parallel with Jang's Control Tower responsibilities, focusing more on long-term policy versus day-to-day operations. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that with Jang's demise, Kim's apparatus may bolster its policy coordination role in order to support the return of the Control Tower role to the Supreme Leader. If this occurs, decision-making in the regime will likely revert to something akin to the hub-and-spoke model that existed under Kim Jong-il. In that model, the Supreme Leader be-

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<sup>342</sup> Consistency of policy will be an early indicator of success in this shift in the role of Control Tower. The tension caused throughout the regime by Jang's purge could lead to bureaucratic self-protection, which could cause policy reversal or stagnation.

<sup>343</sup> "North Korea Getting Ready for Total Revolution and Opening in 2019, What's the Story?" North Korean Information Service, 14 May 2012.

comes the micromanager and is solely responsible for signing off on all policies, relying on the personal secretariat (whose role will likely expand) to set the agenda and coordinate the decision-making process. Depending on how prepared Kim Jong-un is to assume this role, policymaking could become erratic in the absence of family guardians (Kim Kyong-hui) or a regent structure (Jang Song-taek) to provide a check and balance on the young leader's youthful and unfocused leadership style.

### **How stable is North Korea?**

For the second time since Kim Jong-il's death, Pyongyang watchers are speculating about the near- and long-term prospects for the North Korean regime. With the removal of one regent and possible incapacitation of another within a span of months, the issue of stability is no doubt in question. But from outward appearances, nothing much seems to have changed. No unusual military movements have been detected. Rumors of senior aides to Jang Song-taek fleeing to China have largely been proven false. The regime has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that life in Pyongyang goes on and business is as usual.<sup>344</sup> While Jang's purge has not been ignored, as time goes on, North Korean leadership statements are seeking to downplay it, suggesting that the affair was easily contained. While defector media talk of widespread purges at the lower levels throughout the country, the North Korean media are mute on the matter. As for Kim Kyong-hui, her name was listed sixth on the Kim Kuk-tae funeral committee, although she remains out of sight.

The way in which Jang's purge was carried out suggests that the issue of internal stability needs to be examined closely. What sets this purge apart from others is not just that it was tied to a member of the Kim family, which is potentially destabilizing in itself, but also that it was publicized in the way that it was. Kim Jong-un and his supporters took a risk in exposing weakness at the regime's core by openly discussing

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<sup>344</sup> On the same day that North Korea announced the execution of Jang Song-taek, it proposed high-level talks with Seoul for the development of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. This was likely done to show that the Jang affair was an internal matter and not tied to the regime's policy direction.

Jang's indictment in such detail. This was followed by a faster than normal execution. On both counts, the circumstantial evidence points to an internal power struggle—either between Kim and Jang, or between Jang and other power brokers (or, likely, both)—that needed to be addressed and quickly. If true, it is most likely that Kim Jong-un has not yet consolidated his power and the road to that eventual conclusion may have become more difficult. Not only has Kim become the Control Tower, possibly before he was prepared to take on such responsibility, but he is now directly exposed to the power struggles and influence peddling that have been churning within the regime ever since Kim Jong-il's death.<sup>345</sup>

That said, Jang's high-profile purge has probably, for the moment, frozen the leadership in place. The wider leadership is going to be concerned about what happens next. The safe move will be to show unwavering loyalty to the Supreme Leader. This will make for a period of stability as the remnants of the Jang patronage network are either neutralized or coopted. The longer-term prognosis depends on Kim Jong-un's intrinsic leadership traits, as well as the system's ability to move forward with new faces moving to the fore. Provided there has not been a coup in place, as some suggest, the concept of mono-

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<sup>345</sup> According to one Pyongyang watcher, the regent structure around Kim Jong-un began to unravel not at the end of 2013, but in 2012 with the purge of Ri Yong-ho. Jang's purge was just the *coup de grace* of an already evolving process. If this is the case, much of the reported North Korean political history from 2013 needs to be reexamined. It suggests the possibility that Kim Jong-un is more adept at manipulating the levers of power than previously believed. Kim may have taken measures beginning in early 2013 to marginalize Jang's influence and power. This may have been the reason why Jang Song-taek was not a part of the January 26 meeting of the senior officials handling foreign and security policy in which the third nuclear test was allegedly discussed. It could explain why Ri Myong-su, the minister of people's security, was suddenly replaced by Choe Pu-il, who is rumored to be close to Kim Jong-un. It might shed light on the repromotion of generals in 2013 (Choe Ryong-hae, Kim Kyok-sik, Kim Yong-chol) who had been demoted in 2012. In other words, these occurrences may not have been random; rather, they may have been early indications of Jang's diminishing clout at the hands of his nephew. See Alexandre Mansourov, "North Korea: Leadership Schisms and Consolidation During Kim Jong-un's Second Year in Power," *38 North*, 22 January 2014.

lithic leadership rule should enforce stability at the center. However, if policy failures begin to mount, Kim will have left himself with little room for maneuver.<sup>346</sup> He lacks the legitimacy of his father, to say nothing of his grandfather.<sup>347</sup> The Kim family itself has been wounded and, if Kim Kyong-hui is out of the picture,<sup>348</sup> the connectivity to the Mt. Paektu bloodline, which has created the foundation for legitimacy in the regime since its beginning, will begin to fade.<sup>349</sup> In time, instability could creep in and, if allowed to fester, could lead to growing public agitation that the regime cannot control. This would allow the leadership more latitude to begin to go its own way, ignoring the demands from the center.

At the moment of this writing (January 2014), North Korea's future is uncertain. Party and government events will take place in the spring, which will provide some insights into the makeup of the leadership structure. There will be challenges, such as the upcoming U.S.-ROK military drills (Key Resolve and Foal Eagle), which will test the North

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<sup>346</sup> The biggest weakness for Kim as he marks his third year as leader of the reclusive state is that he has been unable to rack up any startling achievements that would have justified his position. "Quick wins" on the policy front are critical to his legitimacy-building campaign.

<sup>347</sup> Kim Jong-un is not protected by former partisan soldiers, like his grandfather, nation founder Kim Il-sung, and he has not been able to build up a strong base of supporters, like his father, Kim Jong-il, who was groomed for 20 years to assume the throne. "Does Aunt's Absence Weaken Kim Jong-un?" *Chosun Ilbo*, 7 January 2014.

<sup>348</sup> In addition to Kim Kyong-hui's health, there are reports, primarily from the Japanese and South Korean media, that she may be out of the country—in Switzerland or Poland—either for medical treatment or because of a falling-out with Kim Jong-un over her husband's execution. If it is the latter, which is still highly speculative at this point, there is a real potential for instability as news of a breach within the Kim family leaks out to the wider leadership.

<sup>349</sup> Some Pyongyang watchers doubt that Kim Kyong-hui's illness will have much impact on her nephew's power consolidation process, which is coming to a close. If she is unable to perform her Party and other official duties, these may fall to Kim Yo-jong, who may follow in her aunt's footsteps as a key advisor to her older brother. See "Absence of Aunt May Not Impact North Korean Leadership," *Korea Herald*, 13 January 2014.

Korean regime's ability to handle a crisis on the peninsula. This could provide an opportunity for provocation in order to enhance the cohesion within the regime around the Supreme Leader. These events will be critical for near-term stability. But the longer-term viability of the regime is not all about power and politics; it is also about policy.

## Implications for policy

Since Jang Song-taek's purge and execution, there have been few signs of major policy shifts from the regime. In his New Year's address, Kim Jong-un underscored his focus on internal security and economic stability. He did not dwell on his uncle's demise, only making reference to the purge as a necessary measure to purify the Party of "counterrevolutionary factions." Through a dramatic reduction of references to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, the 2014 New Year's address highlighted Kim Jong-un's ability to lead on his own now as the sole source of power within the regime.<sup>350</sup> This nod to monolithic leadership was accompanied by an emphasis on "ideological education" in order to prevent external "cultural maneuvers" from infiltrating the regime.

For the second year in a row, Kim listed the economy and improved living standards as his top priorities, putting them ahead of military and ideological issues. Although the speech was free of any laudatory discussion of socialist principles and centralized planning, it did not hint at new initiatives, suggesting that the strategy remains to improve the economic system, not reform it. Kim listed agriculture first among economic priorities—a first in the New Year's message since 2007. His focus on meeting production targets would imply a looming food shortage,<sup>351</sup> although Kim made no such references.<sup>352</sup> Sev-

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<sup>350</sup> References to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, by name or by their titles of "Leader," "General," and "Generalissimo," appeared 65 times in 2012 and 26 times in 2013, but only 8 times in 2014.

<sup>351</sup> Ruediger Frank, "A Guide to Kim Jong Un's 2014 New Year's Speech," *38 North*, 2 January 2014.

<sup>352</sup> In November 2013, the World Food Program and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that North Korea's total crop production was up by about 5 percent, which, if correct, would shrink the

eral weeks after Kim's speech, *Nodong Sinmun* made the priority clear in an article that had bold text throughout—a traditional means of highlighting important policy matters.

This year, we should firmly take hold of agriculture as the primary assault target in the struggle for economic construction and the improvement of the people's living standards, and we should concentrate all our efforts on agriculture.<sup>353</sup>

As it was in Kim's first year in power, light industry was also highlighted. Kim called for creativity at the enterprise level and suggested that new incentives could be used to promote production. However, in a move away from earlier speeches, in which Kim called for enterprises to proceed "independently with initiative," he now urged caution and called for "unified guidance" under "the leadership of the Party."

In terms of foreign and security policy, Kim repeated his 2013 mantra of the need to improve inter-Korean relations along with the warning of possible crises if Seoul and Washington persisted in their "provocative acts" on the peninsula.<sup>354</sup> But in a departure from the regime's vitriolic rhetoric earlier in 2013, Kim avoided criticism of President Park by name. Instead he emphasized the importance of reducing bilateral tensions and even hinted at a possible inter-Korean summit. That said, his speech repeated North Korean complaints about the U.S.-ROK "nuclear war" exercise, which were more pointed than in

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annual shortfall. UN Food and Agricultural Organization, *Special Report: FLO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, 28 November 2013.

<sup>353</sup> "Let Us By All Means Reach the Grain Target This Year by Concentrating All Energy on Farming," *Nodong Sinmun Online*, 18 January 2014.

<sup>354</sup> On 16 January (2014), the National Defense Commission issued a proposal to Seoul calling for an end to the mudslinging between the two Koreas as a way to smooth over relations that reached a low last year. The North also said it would begin unspecified steps to help ease military tensions along the disputed western sea border. This seems to be part of an ongoing campaign to bring about change in Seoul's North Korea policy. At the same time, Pyongyang's proposals were tied to another request that Seoul has already called an impossibility: the cancellation of U.S.-ROK military exercises (Key Resolve and Foal Eagle), which it sees as provocative.



past New Year's addresses, suggesting that the regime reserves the option of using brinkmanship measures in 2014.<sup>355</sup> Reference to North Korea's own nuclear weapons was downplayed, only tied in passing to the economy as part of the *byungjin* policy.<sup>356</sup> Although Kim stressed the need for new and modern weapons, he maintained the line he laid down in March (2013)—i.e., not to increase defense spending.

In short, the execution of Jang Song-taek has not led to any obvious shifts in either domestic or foreign/national security policy. Of course, it will take time to discern whether there have been any changes in the nuances of North Korea's policy stances. Change in the near term most likely will manifest not so much in the policies themselves as in the execution of policy. Until the politics within the regime settle down, it is unlikely that anything other than routine process will continue. Bold initiatives internally are unlikely and the regime will be challenged to respond forthrightly to any external stimuli.<sup>357</sup> Therefore, the bottom-line assumption made in the earlier

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<sup>355</sup> The belief among many in the Pyongyang-watching community is that a North Korean provocation is likely in response to the upcoming Key Resolve/Foal Eagle exercises that run from February into April (2014). While not disputing the possibility of such a response, the author believes that circumstantial evidence suggests that Pyongyang may practice restraint. Conducting a provocation that causes a serious breach in inter-Korean relations would undo months of tentative diplomatic maneuvers by both Seoul and Pyongyang—essentially putting an end, for the foreseeable future, to the economic assistance that North Korea wants from the ROK. It would also push the boundaries of the Sino-North Korean relationship, which could have consequences for North Korean internal security. Therefore, while North Korea will likely sharpen its rhetoric and might even conduct some provocative military maneuvers (possibly tied to its missile force), the regime has many reasons to refrain from more aggressive demonstrations (nuclear/missile test), let alone violent provocations (shelling an island).

<sup>356</sup> Kim failed to take note of the February 2013 nuclear test, which is a departure from the regime's touting of the 2006 and 2009 tests in the following year's messages.

<sup>357</sup> At the time of this writing, both Koreas have been sending signals about possible family reunions. While South Korea has made tangible suggestions about dates for discussions and follow-on meetings, North Korea has been disjointed in its response. This suggests either that Pyongyang is not serious and is looking for ways to drive a wedge between Seoul and

version of this paper still holds true: any expectations of major movement by North Korea on the policy front will not be met until Kim Jong-un has consolidated power.

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Washington, or that internally the North Korean leadership cannot reach a consensus on a way forward.

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## Conclusion

The first edition of this paper, which was published in September 2013, concluded with a description of the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Il-sung's death 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 was 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 was steeped in history and one that was stable and unified behind its Supreme Leader.

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

The second year of Kim Jong-un's rule came to a close in December 2013. In that month, Jang Song-taek was executed. The Pyongyang-watching community was sent scrambling for explanations and wondering what this would mean for the future of the regime. What we

can say with some certainty is that a watershed event has taken place in how the regime is ruled. The regent structure, which was fundamental to governance in the first year and a half, now lies in ruins and Kim Jong-un has broken the bubble in which he previously operated.<sup>358</sup> While Kim has consolidated his position within the regime as the Supreme Leader, the nature of his power is unclear. It will not become more comprehensible until we can understand the motivation behind Jang Song-taek's violent and very public purge, something that is still under debate.

- If Kim Jong-un was behind his uncle's purge, it suggests that his political skills have sharpened to the point that he might be able to run the regime on his own, most likely through the hub-and-spoke leadership style of his father. At the very least, he was able to successfully take on probably the second most powerful individual in the regime in such a way as not to cast the entire regime into chaos. At present, the wider leadership appears frozen in place—something that bodes well for near-term stability. That said, if Kim Jong-un has assumed the role of the “Control Tower” within the regime, the longer-term prognosis of stability depends on his ability to rule effectively.
- However, if Jang Song-taek's purge was the result of a power struggle that forced Kim Jong-un to act, the implications for near-term stability are much less certain. For Jang to be brought down in the absence of a Supreme Leader-led operation, suggests that a coalition of powerful forces has been forged, possibly without Kim's full knowledge. Some have suggested that the purge was the result of a natural coalescing of forces of the KWP Organization Guidance Department, military, and security services. If true, these institutions have influence and agendas that Kim would have to pay attention

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<sup>358</sup> The regent structure dissolution was the final nail in the coffin of the crisis management system that Kim Jong-il had put in place around his son, composed of a Party-military coalition in their 60s and 70s. That coalition has been replaced by one centered largely on security and organizational personnel in their 50s and 60s. Park Young-ja, “Kim Jong-un's Ruling Style and Structure,” *KINU Online Series*, February 2014. Dr. Park is a research fellow at the Center for North Korean Studies.

to, if not follow. The existence of several centers of power does not bode well for near-term stability now that the unifying force (Jang Song-taek) has been removed. Kim Jong-un's ability to keep these powerful forces in check will be critical for regime cohesion going forward.

Regardless of which scenario is currently taking place, this paper argues that the consolidation process has been accelerated but has not yet been completed. Therefore, the stability of the regime remains unclear.

The other question facing the Pyongyang-watching community concerns the course of North Korean policy. Through the first year and well into the second year of his rule, Kim Jong-un appeared to be following a policy course that fit well within the boundaries allegedly laid down in Kim Jong-il's last will and testament. While the policy strokes may have sometimes been relatively bold, policymaking remained well within established guidelines. The questions for North Korea watchers were obvious. Would Kim Jong-un at some point begin to push his own policy agenda? Would the North Korean leadership willingly accept Kim's orders once he moved beyond the dictates laid down in his father's last will and testament? Would Kim Jong-un break ranks with his heritage and lead North Korea on a fundamentally new path (both internally and externally)—or would he be content to muddle through, seeking only to make changes around the margins? While many in the Pyongyang-watching community had come to conclusions on these answers, this author argued that the future was not yet set. Politics inside the regime remained to be played out—and until that occurred, Kim's true intentions, and even his own survival, could not be divined.

Well into Kim Jong-un's second year in power, North Korea was stuck between two major competing policy goals. Pyongyang needed 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 spewed from the media about sacrifice and "military first" would have rung hollow. At the same time, securing support from the international community, including a peace treaty with the United States and South Korea that would bring with it follow-on security guarantees and economic assistance, was at the heart of the regime's promises to create a "strong

and prosperous nation”—a promise that if left unfulfilled would undermine Kim Jong-un’s ability to fully consolidate his power.

These goals were diametrically opposed, and yet Pyongyang contended that they could be achieved simultaneously—at least rhetorically, that was the strategy the regime laid out for itself. It is not clear whether Kim Jong-un and his advisors had a roadmap for moving in one direction or the other. As a consequence, it was a real possibility that North Korea would do nothing more than “muddle through.” The regime has a standard set of tactics and strategies (well worn and in the past somewhat successful) that, at least for the time being, were easier to follow, but they did not constitute a long-term strategic set of choices and would not lead to any dramatic breakthroughs in how North Korea conducted its business.

Just as it has made the Pyongyang-watching community rethink long-held assumptions of power politics during Kim Jong-un’s two years in power, Jang Song-taek’s purge has raised questions about policymaking in the regime. Previously, a common understanding of the power structure in the North was summed up in the phrase, “Kim Jong-un reigns, whereas Jang Song-taek rules.” As outlined in this paper, Jang, until his arrest and execution, acted as the “Control Tower.” In this role, he was the driving force behind the regime’s policy formulation. He was also in charge of special economic zones near the China border such as Rason and Hwanggeumpyong as well as overall activities to attract foreign capital. This led many in the external media to portray Jang as the primary driver behind reform and pragmatic policymaking within the regime. This may eventually prove to be true, but since his execution, another narrative is also emerging.

A careful examination of the *Report on the Enlarged Meeting of Political Bureau of Central Committee of Korean Worker’s Party* and the sentencing of the special military tribunal from the DPRK Ministry of State Security, reveals that Jang may have been the primary beneficiary of vested interests and could have had a role in obstructing the Cabinet’s economic improvement efforts. He could, therefore, have been purged and executed because of his obsession with material and organizational interests that challenged and undermined Kim Jong-un’s stated policy initiatives. At the time of this writing, there is some circumstantial evidence to support a rewriting of Jang Song-taek’s role within the

regime—one of being an obstructionist rather than a pragmatic reformer.

- First, there are no apparent signs of personnel changes signaling policy shifts. Major policymakers such as Pak Pong-ju (economic affairs), Kim Yang-gon (inter-Korean relations), Kang Sok-ju (nuclear and American affairs), and Kim Young-il (China) are still in their positions.
- Second, in his New Year's address, Kim Jong-un not only underscored the continuation of the Cabinet's central role in economic management and the importance of creativity and innovation in individual economic units; he also expressed his willingness to improve inter-Korean relations. In January (2014), the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) published an open letter from the National Defence Commission to South Korea. In unprecedented language, the letter proposed to Seoul that mutual denunciations and provocative behaviors be stopped.<sup>359</sup>
- Third, although North Korea accused China of being an accomplice in Jang's crimes, the regime continues its economic cooperation with China—something that appears to undermine the argument that Kim Jong-un will move away from a pragmatic policy agenda.

At the time of this writing, there are too many unanswered questions and contradictory sources of information to make any prognostications about even North Korean political and policy dynamics, much less about the larger issue of regime stability. This has not stopped the rush to judgment by many analysts who see dangerous cracks in the edifice of North Korean power and the potential for collapse or, at the very least, wild and dangerous shifts in Pyongyang's behavior. Much of this analysis is based on straight-line assumptions of the reasons behind Jang Song-taek's purge and what this means for Kim Jong-un's power and his ability to conduct affairs of state. Whether

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<sup>359</sup> That said, it also urged South Korean leaders to halt drills for a war of aggression to be staged against their compatriots in collusion with outside forces—in other words, to call off the upcoming military exercises (Key Resolve and Foal Eagle) with the United States.



based on wishful thinking or based on jaundiced logic born of North Korea fatigue, these assessments are probably premature and may be flawed. As one Pyongyang watcher cautioned:

Here, in February 2014, it seems we need to become a little humbler in our assessments of North Korea. The tendency based on predictions upon past experiences places limits on our capacity to forecast the future, when that future is sure to harbor many unpredictable elements. We cannot say that since the Kim Jong-il system survived the death of Kim Il-sung so the Kim Jong-un regime will surely stay sturdy, nor can we make the assumption that the regime of Kim Jong-un is on the brink of dissolution... We must break away from these fixed dichotomous viewpoints, and observe North Korea with an open mind.<sup>360</sup>

Going forward, the Pyongyang-watching community needs to take a fresh look at the North Korea problem. By putting aside assumptions and searching for evidence to answer three questions, analysts will go a long way to providing clarity on the near- and medium-term future (two to five years) of the Kim Jong-un regime.

- **What was the motivation behind the purge of Jang Song-taek?** The answer will provide insights about the current stability at the top of the regime. If the purge was a pre-planned inevitability carried out under Kim Jong-un's orders, the implications are less dire than if it was a shock to the system driven by another center(s) of power not entirely controlled by the Supreme Leader. Depending on the motivation, the political power and policy ramifications could be more or less dramatic.
- **What are the fundamentals of Kim Jong-un's policy agenda—in both the near and the medium terms (two to five years out)?** How committed Kim is to the *byungjin* line will determine the prospects for economic reform and international engagement. The flexibility that is inherent in this co-development strategy is tied to internal politics and Kim Jong-un's own legitimacy. As he consolidates his power, the fidelity of this policy line could change.

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<sup>360</sup> Ahn Jong Sik, "Time to Take a Step Back on North Korea," op. cit.

- **How does North Korea expect to execute this agenda?** North Korea will eventually have to reveal the direction of its domestic and foreign/security policy directions. As the regime wrestles with the implications of its policy line, shifts in this agenda could occur; that is not likely, but it is a possibility. There will be opportunities in the near future to gauge how North Korea intends to execute this agenda. South Korean–U.S. military exercises (Foal Eagle/Key Resolve), for example, will elicit a response from North Korea, the nature of which will provide insights into Pyongyang’s calculus for foreign engagement and the regime’s ability to extricate itself from the policy dilemma it now faces. The March/April leadership meetings will be an opportunity for Kim Jong-un to firmly place his stamp on the leadership by bringing in new faces, which could provide clues about how the regime plans to move forward in the future.

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. Answering the questions above will not provide perfect clarity. Policymakers will continue to struggle with fundamental questions of North Korea’s strategic calculus and whether its nuclear advances mean that the policy of “strategic patience” is too risky to continue. However, by assuming away the answers to these three questions, they run the risk of policy failure at the least and disastrous unintended consequences at the most.

This paper has presented a snapshot in time of the first two years of the Kim Jong-un era. The shelf life for some of the findings is short and will be overtaken by events; other parts are more enduring and go to the essence of the North Korean regime. At the very least, this paper has, hopefully, created a baseline for future assessments.

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