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The Limits of Economic Reform in North Korea under the Kim Jong-un Regime: Lessons from Chinese Experiences

Suk-Jin Kim*

The Kim Jong-un regime has sought to improve the productivity of state-owned enterprises and collective farms by granting greater managerial autonomy and material incentives. While there are some positive aspects to this reform, it is considerably more limited than that of China in the 1980s which began privatization from the onset of its reform process. Unlike China, collective farms have not been disbanded nor have new non-state enterprises developed in the industrial sector. Considering that privatization is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship—the basic driving force of economic growth, this reform is unlikely to stimulate long-term growth. The limited nature of the reform is closely related to the fact that the regime remains oppressive domestically and isolated externally.

Keywords: Kim Jong-un Regime, Economic Reform, Chinese Reform, Privatization, Entrepreneurship

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1. Introduction

Ten years have passed since Kim Jong-un took power in North Korea. During this time, he has not only managed to consolidate his power base but also more vigorously pursued nuclear development and economic growth than his father and predecessor Kim Jong-il, despite initial concerns about the young and inexperienced leader's ability to rule the country.

The most noteworthy aspect of the Kim Jong-un regime's economic policy is its economic reform, referred to as 'our own style economic management method' in the country. While the regime claims that this is not a reform but rather an improvement, it can still be regarded as a reform if it entails meaningful changes to the economic system. As the root cause of the country's current underdevelopment can be traced to the systemic defects of its socialist planned economy, whether North Korea is undertaking a substantial reform will be a major point of interest in predicting the future of its economy.

There are some previous studies on the economic reforms under the Kim Jong-un regime.¹ According to these studies, the reform policies attempted since the early days of the regime have been somewhat positive as they have promoted decentralization and marketization in a wide range of economic areas, including enterprises, agriculture, foreign trade,

1 Moon-Soo Yang, "'Economic Management System in Our Style' Observed through the Revised Laws in the Kim Jong-un era," *Unification Policy Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 81-115 [in Korean]; Andrei Lankov, "Is Byungjin Policy Failing? Kim Jong Un's Unannounced Reform and its Chances of Success," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 29, no. 1 (2017): 25-45; Seok-ki Lee et al., *A Study on the Economic Reform in North Korea under Kim Jong-un: Focusing on the 'Our Style of Economic Management'* (Sejong: Korea Institute for Industrial Economics and Trade, 2018) [in Korean]; Ki Bum Han, *Economic Reform and Bureaucratic Politics in North Korea* (Seoul: Institute for North Korean Studies, 2019) [in Korean]; Dongho Jo, "An Evaluation of the Reform and Opening of the North Korean Economy in the Kim Jong-un Era," *Korean Economic Forum* 13, no. 4 (2021): 1-37 [in Korean]; Moon-Soo Yang, "The Economic Reform of North Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era: Status & Evaluation," KDI Working Paper, Korea Development Institute, June 2021.

budget, and finance. What is particularly important is the fact that these policies resemble those implemented in China in the 1980s.² The successful experience of China may suggest a more optimistic outlook for the North Korean economy.

It should not be overlooked, however, that the fundamental elements that contributed to China's success are missing in the reform of North Korea. In China, the overall trend of privatization of farms and enterprises has been clearly visible from the beginning of the reform process. In contrast, there are no measures that allow privatization in the official reform by the Kim regime, although partial privatization can be found in the informal sector.³ Considering that privatization is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship—the basic driving force of economic growth, it seems unlikely that this reform will be effective in the long-run.

This paper highlights the limitations of North Korea's economic reform by contrasting it to the Chinese experience, with a particular focus on the management method of state-owned enterprises and collective farms—the main two pillars of its socialist economy. These limitations are closely related to the fact that the country today faces substantially different political and external conditions compared to China in the 1980s. North Korea must restart its reform under a completely different environment by easing political and ideological control as well as normalizing its foreign relations through denuclearization to begin on the path towards true prosperity.

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- 2 Moon-Soo Yang "North Korea's Economic Reform Measures in the Kim Jong-un Era: A Comparison with China's Experiences," *Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59, no. 3 (2016): 114-159 [in Korean]; Kevin Gray and Jong-Woon Lee, *North Korea and the Geopolitics of Development* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 167-192.
 - 3 Suk-Jin Kim and Moon-Soo Yang, *The Growth of the Informal Economy in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2015): 20-24, 31-36; Moon-Soo Yang and In-Joo Yoon, "De Facto Privatization of North Korean Enterprises: A Quantitative Approach on Level and Trend," *Unification Studies* 20, no. 2 (2016): 45-88. [in Korean]

2. Reform of State-owned Enterprises

1) Socialist Enterprise Responsibility Management System

The most important component of the Kim Jong-un regime's economic reform is the so-called 'socialist enterprise responsibility management system' intended to improve the management of state-owned enterprises. The core of the modern economy is the industrial sector which includes mining, manufacturing, and electricity supply, and the enterprises in this sector are all state-owned in North Korea. So it is natural that improving the performance of the state-owned enterprises becomes a top priority for North Korea's economic development. Based on the amendments to the economic laws since the mid-2010s as well as the educational materials for party officials, the reform measures can be summarized as follows.⁴

First, the enterprises' right to plan their production has been expanded by reducing the number of 'central indicators' issued by the State Planning Commission, and instead, increasing the number of 'enterprise indicators' determined by the enterprises themselves. The problem of 'overlapping' plans can be resolved through 'order contracts' among enterprises.

Second, enterprises have been granted the right to set the prices and sell their products within certain limits. More specifically, "for products based on order contracts with the buyers or on indicators that they have self-identified, enterprises may independently set the prices and sell the products in consideration of the demand of the buyers following the principles and methods of price-setting so that the costs of production are compensated and the production can be expanded."⁵

Third, enterprises have been granted the right to manage their finances. This includes the right to finance management funds by

4 For more details, see Seok-ki Lee et al., *op. cit.*: 95-129.

5 Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Enterprise Act (revised in 2014), Article 39 (recited from *Ibid.*: 106).

themselves as well as the right to independently distribute the residual revenue remaining after paying the state. In particular, the latter includes the right of enterprises to set the wages of their workers within certain limits.

Fourth, enterprises have also been given the 'right to adjust labor' to restructure their organizations and to alter the number of employees. This does not mean that they are free to fire or hire workers but rather that they may adjust the number of employees through certain processes and agreements with other enterprises.

Lastly, the regime has allowed enterprises to self-finance investment in equipment rather than solely rely on the national budget, and has also granted them the right to transfer or rent out unnecessary equipment under specified conditions.

In sum, North Korea's reform of the state-owned enterprises is aimed at expanding managerial autonomy and providing material incentives. This can be viewed as a decentralization in that it partially transfers the central government's authority to individual enterprises. And it is also a marketization as it partially applies market mechanisms to the state-run sector. This reform resembles to some extent the experiments attempted in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe prior to post-communist transition, as well as in China during the early stages of its reform and opening-up.

2) A Comparison with China's Enterprise Reform

China's experience of reforming its enterprises in the 1980s provides important lessons and insights. While the reform in China resulted in extremely positive outcomes, this was not always the case in former socialist countries. The economies of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe failed to meet expectations, not only before the transition but also afterward, despite having implemented more radical reforms. The main feature that distinguishes China from other former socialist countries is

that a very large number of new enterprises emerged and developed vigorously through the reform process.⁶

In the transition economies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, existing enterprises that had been state-owned, but mostly being privatized, still accounted for the majority of businesses during the 1990s. In contrast, state-owned enterprises in China were rarely privatized up until the mid-1990s. Yet, different types of enterprises have emerged in very large numbers, such as collective-owned enterprises, individual-owned enterprises with less than 8 employees, privately owned enterprises with 8 or more employees, and foreign-funded enterprises including those from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.⁷ In 1980, there were only 380,000 enterprises in China's industrial sector and among those, approximately 80,000 state-owned companies accounted for about three-fourths of the gross industrial output. However, in the fifteen years since then, approximately 6 million individual-owned enterprises, more than a million collective-owned enterprises, and several tens of thousands of foreign-funded enterprises have been created. As a result of the rapid growth of these new enterprises, state-owned enterprises only accounted for about a third of the gross industrial output in 1995. Such trends were not limited to the industrial sector. In fact, the number of new enterprises became much larger, and the share of state-owned enterprises in employment and production became much smaller in other sectors such as construction, wholesale and retail trade, and transportation.

The state-owned enterprise reform pursued by the Chinese government at the beginning was not that much different from those attempted in the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European

6 John McMillan and Christopher Woodruff, "The Central Role of Entrepreneurs in Transition Economies," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 16, no. 3 (2002): 153-170.

7 Gary H. Jefferson and Thomas G. Rawski, "Ownership Change in Chinese Industry," in *Enterprise Reform in China: Ownership, Transition, and Performance*, eds. Gary H. Jefferson and Inderjit Singh (Washington, D.C.: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23-27.

countries before the transition. This reform of the early 1980s was often called 'power delegating and profit sharing (放權讓利).'⁸ 'Power delegating' involves the process of allowing enterprises greater managerial autonomy, while 'profit sharing' refers to material incentives provided through a certain amount of profits retained in the enterprises. But the performance of state-owned enterprises had only improved marginally in the early 1980s. In response, the government further intensified reforms by granting enterprises greater power and more shares of the profit, and it is widely believed that the performance of state-owned enterprises vastly improved after these additional measures were implemented.⁹

It is necessary to note, however, that it was not only the reform of state-owned enterprises itself but also the new competitive environment caused by the widespread emergence of the other types of enterprises that led to the improvements in the performance of state-owned enterprises.¹⁰ The Chinese government initially acknowledged the 'individual economy' consisting of small businesses with less than 8 employees in the new constitution in 1982, and then legalized the entire private sector, including 'privately-owned enterprises,' hiring more than 8 employees through a subsequent constitutional amendment in 1988.¹¹ Moreover, new 'collective-owned enterprises' emerged in large numbers, although this type of enterprise was already in existence as an alternative form of socialist enterprises before the reform.

Here, it is worth emphasizing the important role of collective-owned enterprises in rural areas during the early reform period. These enterprises

8 Jinglian Wu, *Understanding and Interpreting Chinese Economic Reform* (Mason, Ohio: Thomson, 2005), 139-154; Barry Naughton, *Growing out of the Plan: Chinese Economic Reform, 1978-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 97-136.

9 Barry Naughton, op. cit.: 200-243, 273-308.

10 Gary H. Jefferson and Thomas G. Rawski, "Enterprise Reform in Chinese Industry," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 8, no. 2 (1994): 47-70.

11 Donald Clarke, Peter Murrell, and Susan Whiting, "The Role of Law in China's Economic Development," in *China's Great Economic Transformation*, eds. Loren Brandt and Thomas G. Rawski (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 381-383.

were legally owned by the local rural communities (townships and villages), but in reality, many of them were not much different from, and later transformed into, private enterprises as they were created and led by individual entrepreneurs.¹² It was also pivotal that most of the successful rural collective-owned enterprises were located in the suburbs near large cities. The growth of these enterprises was more of an expansion of the urban economy than of the rural community, and the competitive pressure they collectively asserted on the urban enterprises became an important factor in the development of the overall economy. In other words, China's enterprise reform was not limited to state-owned enterprises but widely impacted enterprises with different types of ownership.

Compared to the Chinese experience, the crucial difference in North Korea's enterprise reform is that it remains restricted to existing state-owned enterprises and has been unable to stimulate the growth of new enterprises. While the growth of the new rural collective-owned enterprises in China was basically the result of a spontaneous response by the farmers to the political and institutional settings at the time, such developments were also promoted by liberalizing policies such as the relaxation of the state monopoly on the purchase of agricultural materials and the supply of investment capital by the local Rural Credit Cooperatives which were part of the state-run financial system.¹³ Moreover, *de facto* private ownership in many of these enterprises was later recognized and transformed to a *de jure* one through further reforms in official laws and institutions as stated above.

In contrast, it is difficult to find new enterprises that have been created and managed by individual entrepreneurs in the industrial sector, the central part of the entire economy, in North Korea today, while the private activities of the self-employed in the service sector have greatly expanded. This is because the regime remains very conservative both politically and

12 Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 50-108.

13 Barry Naughton, *op. cit.*: 137-169.

ideologically, and also because official reforms in its laws and institutions have not crossed the boundaries of the socialist system. It is presumed that this fundamental limitation is the reason why the regime has not implemented effective policies supporting the development of non-state enterprises.

In short, the enterprise reform attempted by the Kim Jong-un regime remains far less extensive than that of China in the 1980s. Considering such differences, it is unlikely to bring about comprehensive and sustained economic development, while it may have resulted in small and partial improvements. Its effectiveness may have weakened even more because of the sharp reduction in imports of crucial intermediate and capital goods due to the strict sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and the border closure since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴

3. Reform of Collective Farms

1) Expansion of Farms' Autonomy and the Field Responsibility System

The collective farm, the basic organization in the agricultural sector, is one of the two pillars of the North Korean economy, along with the state-owned enterprise.¹⁵ Therefore, reforming the collective farming system is another key component of economic reform. In particular, as food shortages remain one of the most serious problems, how well the agricultural reform addresses this problem will serve as the key to improving many lives of ordinary people in the country.

14 Kyoochul Kim, "Impacts of COVID-19 on North Korea's Trade," in *2020/2021 The DPRK Economic Outlook*, ed. Suk Lee (Sejong: Korea Development Institute, 2021), 80-106.

15 Each collective farm in North Korea consists of an average of 300 households and 5 to 10 work groups, each with 50 to 100 workers, and the basic units of management were originally the work groups. Kyung-Saeng Boo et. al., *Agriculture in North Korea: Current State and Development Prospects* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2001), 78. [in Korean]

The reform policies implemented by the Kim Jong-un regime on the collective farms can be summarized as follows. First, the managerial autonomy of collective farms has been increased. The agricultural law revised in 2014 granted collective farms a variety of rights. These include; the right to plan independently the cultivation of some crops that have 'high profitability' based on the 'farm's own indicators' along with main crops planned by the central government; the right to reallocate labor according to the specific conditions of each farm; the right to utilize funds that have been accumulated in bank accounts; the right to collect and utilize extra funds owned by members of the local community; the right to sell excess crops remaining after state procurement; the right to set the price of crops produced based on the 'farm's own indicators' and sell them; and the right to export products through 'relevant agencies'.¹⁶

Second, the 'field responsibility system' has been introduced within the framework of the 'sub-work team management system,' which was first implemented in North Korea during the mid-1960s with the aim of enhancing work incentives by linking productivity and remuneration.¹⁷ However, the problem of lacking incentives in the communist collective farming system had not been solved as individual efforts had still not been linked to personal income within the sub-work teams. That's why the regime introduced the field responsibility system, an attempt to strengthen work incentives. It is reported that the sub-work teams consisting of 10 to 25 workers have been further divided into smaller field teams, each consisting of 5 to 6 workers from 2 to 3 families, who have been placed in charge of their own fields.¹⁸ The size of field teams appears to differ depending on specific conditions of farms and work groups. Some North Korean refugees have testified that in some cases individual members or

16 Seok-ki Lee et al., op. cit.: 66-68.

17 Young-Hoon Kim, Hyung-Jin Jeon, and Soon-Cheol Moon, *A Study of the Income Distribution System in North Korea's Collective Farms* (Seoul: Korea Rural Economic Institute, 2001), 16-29 [in Korean]; So-young Kim, "Plan and Market in North Korea's Agriculture After the Economic Crisis" (Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to University of North Korean Studies, 2017), 65-68. [in Korean]

18 Seok-ki Lee et al., op. cit.: 225.

families are assigned their own fields for which they are responsible.¹⁹

The basic principle of distribution to the farm members has also changed.²⁰ According to official principles, each member of a farm would receive 260kg of unprocessed grains per year, and the rest of their income in cash. Specifically, the remaining amount of crops after deducting shares for farms—the basic food for farm members, seeds, and fodder—had to be sold to the state at very low prices set by the state, and the cash earned from this sale was distributed among the members. Under this system, the additional income apart from the basic food was extremely small, which consequently tended to reduce work incentives.

The most important is how to decide the amount of crops to be sold to the state. In the past, this was based on the needs for public food distribution of the state, regardless of how much farming resources (fertilizer and pesticide) the government had provided to farms. But under the new system, the amount is determined by translating the fees for land and irrigation and the materials provided by the state into actual agricultural products, and the rest (excluding seeds and feed) is then distributed to each member in kind based on each person's 'earned days of labor.' This enables farmers to earn more income by selling excess food at market prices if they succeed in increasing their production. In this way, the mandatory amount supplied to the state can be predetermined, and the remaining crops can be distributed based on the harvest performance of each field. In sum, the main goal of the reform is to grant stronger incentives to each farm member.

These points suggest that the regime's agricultural reform has similar features and objectives to the enterprise reform. They are both intended to strengthen the producers' incentives to work through decentralization and marketization. If the new system works as intended, farms would utilize their expanded autonomy to acquire farming resources from and

19 For more details see So-young Kim op. cit.: 190-209.

20 For more details see Seok-ki Lee et al., op. cit.: 242-245.

sell their produce to the markets that have already been developed. And farm members would be compensated based on the performance of their respective fields.

Has the reform resulted in an increase in agricultural production and farm member income as intended? While it is difficult to answer this question due to the lack of reliable data, we can make a rough guess based on the Chinese experiences during the 1980s as well as some information about the current situation in North Korea.

2) A Comparison with China's Agricultural Reform

The agricultural reform in China in the 1980s is the most important example to refer to when evaluating North Korea's recent reform of collective farms. China's collective farm system prior to the reform was similar to that of North Korea and resulted in chronic food shortages due to its inefficiency. But China was basically able to solve its food problems in a few years thanks to the success of the reform. In contrast, North Korea's reform still appears to have had only marginal success.

In the past, the income of the Chinese farm members under the collective system was not related to individual efforts and was instead tied to working hours. Therefore, the farm members only worked to fill their timesheets without much enthusiasm. A variety of responsibility systems have been introduced with the aim of encouraging work incentives since the late 1970s, including 'contracting job (包工)', 'contracting output quota (包產)', and 'contracting responsibility (包干)'.²¹ In particular, the latter two were called a 'output-linked system (聯產)' as the remuneration was based on harvest performance.

'Contracting job' gives team members certain entitlements as a basis

21 Jinglian Wu, op. cit.: 108-114; Yak-Yeow Kueh, "China's New Agricultural Policy Program: Major Economic Consequences, 1979-1983," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 8, no. 4 (1984): 354-358.

for participating in the distribution of the final output by the farm in exchange for performing specific tasks, such as rice-transplanting and harvesting. Meanwhile, the basic practice of 'contracting output quota' was to assign plots to farmers under contracts stipulating output quotas which include the amount of production mandatorily purchased by the government and the above-quota part retained by the farmers. 'Contracting responsibility' was similar to contracting output quota as they allowed farmers to take home the remaining crops, but differed in that the individual farmers were granted the right to decide their production plans and to use draft animals.

The responsibility systems were either based on work groups (組) or households (戶). 'Contracting job' was operated generally based on work groups. In this case, it was called 'Contracting job to each work group (包工到組).' In the case of contracting output quota, 'contracting output quota to each work group (包產到組)' was also the norm at the beginning, but this quickly shifted to 'contracting output quota to each household (包產到戶)' which further led to 'contracting responsibility to each household (包干到戶).'

China's agricultural reform rapidly shifted from contracting jobs to contracting output quota, and then to contracting responsibility, also changing from contracting to each work group to contracting to each household. As a result, 'contracting responsibility to each household' became the norm by late 1983, which effectively disbanded collective farms, so called 'people's communes' and established the 'household responsibility system.' In other words, the communist system of collective farming was abolished, and replaced by the traditional system of small family farms.

<Table 1> The Agricultural Responsibility System in China, 1980~1983: Four Main Types

		Contracting What?		
		Contracting Job	Contracting Output Quota	Contracting Responsibility
Contracting to Whom?	Work Group	Contracting job to each work group (包工到組)	Contracting output quota to each work group (包產到組)	
	Household		Contracting output quota to each household (包產到戶)	Contracting responsibility to each household (包干到戶)

Source: Author's own summary based on the studies cited in footnote 21.

North Korea's current field responsibility system is similar to China's contracting output quota in that distribution is tied to harvest performance. But it is very different from contracting responsibility to each household, the final result of the Chinese reform process, in that the managerial right still remains with the collective farms. Moreover, it is not clear whether the basic units are work groups or households. While they appear to be small groups in principle, there are quite a few cases where they are households since each collective farm can adopt the system independently based on their specific conditions.²² In short, North Korea's field responsibility system is likely a mix of China's 'contracting output quota to each work group (包產到組)' and 'contracting output quota to each household (包產到戶).'

How do these differences in North Korea and China impact work incentives of the farmers? In China, farmers preferred contracting to each household over contracting to each work group, and preferred contracting responsibility over contracting output quota. These preferences were reflected in how the reforms were actually implemented. Changes in the farming system were initially made informally based on the preferences

22 An article in *Rodong Sinmun* in 2015 reports on the practice of a collective farm in Seoncheon County as follows: "Work groups, the basic production unit, were reorganized to allow the members of the same family to work together." See "The Secret to Making a Leap in a Single Year: On the Business of Workers of Suk-Wha Corporate Farm in Seoncheon County, Who Produced an Additional 1,000 Tons of Grain Last Year," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 7, 2015.

of the farmers, but later were adopted officially by the government. The farmers' preferences were a function of the incentives. The reason why contracting responsibility to each household, a system of granting individual households the right to manage and be responsible for their output, became the eventual result of reforms is that this method was the most effective in increasing productivity.

Agricultural production in China increased rapidly following this reform which solved its food shortage problem over the coming few years. The noteworthy phenomenon was that the production of non-grain foods such as vegetables, fruits, and meats increased much more rapidly than that of grains.²³ These food products contributed to better nutrition, which meant that the diet of the Chinese people improved qualitatively as well as quantitatively. This was achieved through the shift to commercial food crops and livestock products by independent farmers who newly had the right to choose their own crops, coupled with the simultaneous growth in the food market.

In comparison, under the collective farming system, farm managers focus on the production of staple grains in order to fulfill the mandatory amount to be purchased by the state for nationwide distribution. Though the North Korean regime has expanded the autonomy of collective farms to a certain extent, this policy is not likely to result in the significant increase in non-staple food production other than basic grains because the regime, still facing a shortage of staple food, continues to emphasize the production of the main grains, such as rice and maize, for staple food.²⁴ Though it appears that the production of commercial non-cereal crops has increased considerably since the early 2000s, this was due to the growth of informal private farming

23 Jikun Huang, Keijiro Otsuka, and Scott Rozelle, "Agriculture in China's Development," in *China's Great Economic Transformation*, ed. Loren Brendt and Thomas G. Rawski (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 478-488.

24 Kim Jong-un stated that "agricultural production should be reorganized into a grain-centered structure ... Instead of non-cereal crops, we need to increase the area of rice and corn cultivation." Kim Jong-un, "Let's Innovate in Agricultural Production under the Banner of Socialist Rural Area Theses," *Chollima* no. 3 (2014): 13.

in small plots and private stockbreeding outside collective farms. But because the share of this informal farming remains limited, such developments will not likely result in such a huge increase in food production as observed during the reform period in China.

Another important point is how the mandatory amount purchased by the government is determined. Here, the question is whether the amount is decided by a fixed ratio or a fixed quantity. A fixed ratio indicates a method in which the state and the farmers both share the benefits of increased production as well as the risks of a bad harvest. In comparison, the farmers enjoy all the benefits of increased production but bear all the risks related to potential losses under a method of fixed quantity. While each of these methods has their respective merits and demerits, the latter is better aligned with the objectives of the reform since it better incentivizes the farmers as long as the amount purchased by the state is set appropriately. In the case of China, the amount was usually based on a fixed quantity which resulted in a substantial increase in productivity following the transition to contracting responsibility to each household. According to studies based on the testimony of North Korean refugees, the method appears to have been different in each region and for each farm in North Korea.²⁵ In some cases the method may also be ambiguous. For example, if the authorities raise arbitrarily the mandatory amount that a farm has to supply to the state, when the yield of a farm has increased significantly, this will actually be the fixed ratio method, even if the fixed quantity method has been used before.

Moreover, the effects of reform may be marginal, regardless of how the amount sold to the government is determined, if the portion distributed to the farmers is too small. The North Korean public food distribution system has not been operated properly since the 1990s crisis. As this has led to a complication of the food distribution channels, there were frequent cases of farm members not receiving their basic food portions.²⁶ Under such conditions, the farmers were forced to make their living by the private farming

25 So-young Kim op. cit.: 192-194 and 200.

26 For more details see So-young Kim op. cit.: 212-221.

of small plots and stockbreeding, not by income from collective farms. As such, if farm members are in a position where they can't depend on work at collective farms and instead must rely on their own endeavors, the impact of reforming distribution methods at collective farms may be minimal. A study based on the testimonies of North Korean refugees suggests that the field responsibility system has not been able to sufficiently solve North Korea's food problems because of these limitations.²⁷

The limits of reform are also revealed through the grain production data self-reported by the regime. According to North Korea's Voluntary National Review (VNR) submitted to the UN, annual grain production has been stagnant from 2014 to 2020 even though collective farms underwent reform during this period.²⁸ Moreover, the fact that the production has greatly varied from year to year suggests that the harvest has still been strongly influenced by weather conditions during farming seasons. Simply put, agriculture in North Korea has not been modernized enough to overcome natural constraints.

Lastly, it is important to note that China's agricultural reform not only improved the agricultural production but also vastly contributed to the development of its manufacturing and service sector. Agricultural productivity sharply increased once collective farms were disbanded and replaced by a system of family farms, which, in turn, enabled greater production with much less labor force. Excess labor force moved from agriculture to manufacturing and services, which consequently enhanced production in these sectors. The number of workers employed by rural collective-owned enterprises grew rapidly from about 30 million to about 100 million and the number of workers from rural areas working in the cities exceeded 60 million over a decade later.²⁹ And even apart from these groups,

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 190-238.

²⁸ Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda* (June 2021): 15. This review can be downloaded from the website of UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/vnrs/#VNRDatabase>.

there was also a large number of farmers who either worked a second job other than farming or changed their profession altogether.

Compared to the Chinese experiences, the reform of collective farms in North Korea is much more passive and limited in scope considering that the reform has merely changed how these farms are managed and has not actually disbanded them. The abolishment of the collective farming system, as in China's case, would grant farmers greater economic freedom, which, in turn, would lead to prosperity not only in the agricultural sector but in the entire economy.

4. The Political Challenge and Foreign Relations

The initialization, progress, and outcome of economic reform in a country are heavily influenced by its political system and foreign relations. And it is in this regard that North Korea's reform has also differed considerably from the Chinese experiences.

First, the economic reform in North Korea is being implemented without any changes in its politics and ideology.³⁰ In China, there were significant changes in its politics and ideology in the late 1970s and early 1980s when economic reforms first began, and these changes cultivated a social context that enabled the success of the reforms.³¹ The personalist dictatorship in the

29 National Bureau of Statistics of China, *China Statistical Yearbook 1999*, Table 5-4 Number of Employed Persons by Residence in Urban and Rural Areas, accessed September 13, 2021,

<https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/statisticaldata/yearlydata/YB1999e/e04e.htm>; Kam Wing Chan, "Migration and Development in China: Trends, Geography and Current Issues," *Migration and Development* 1, no. 2 (2012): 187-205.

30 Sungmin Cho, "Why North Korea Could Not Implement the Chinese Style Reform and Opening?: The Internal Contradiction Between Economic Reform and Political Stability," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7 no. 3 (2020): 305-324.

31 Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism, 1978-1994* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 81-136.

Mao Zedong era was replaced by collective leadership, and political repression was greatly eased with numerous people who had been imprisoned being released and reinstated. In terms of ideology, pragmatism, which emphasizes economic development instead of dogmatic adherence to communism, has prevailed.

The reason why political and ideological change is important is that economic reform can only succeed if people behave in a new way without worrying much about the possibility of being punished.³² But the regime's political, ideological, and socio-cultural control under hereditary dictatorship remains strong in North Korea. In this environment, it is unlikely that officials and ordinary people will be able to actively engage in new businesses without fear of political persecution, even if reform policies are being promoted by the regime.

Second, the reform is being implemented without being sufficiently announced to the public. While several economic laws have been revised and educational materials for officials have been distributed, new rules in these documents are abstract and ambiguous about how the reform policies are supposed to be applied in the workplaces. Similarly, though official media such as *Rodong Sinmun* have often reported on enterprises and farms undertaking these policies, the reports are so vague that it is difficult to know what is actually happening.

There was also considerable ambiguity during the initial phase of the reform in China. But the substance of the reforms has been clearly defined in its laws and regulations, and applied in the field in a short period of time. As studies and statistics on the state of the economy have been reported, the progress, achievements, and problems of the reform were revealed in detail. This has not been the case in North Korea at all.

³² Generally speaking, as Kornai stated, "the radicalism of the changes in political structure primarily decides how far the whole [socialist] system can depart from its classical form." János Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 409.

Third, the Kim regime has carried out its reform amid international isolation. In stark contrast, domestic reforms were closely tied to opening up to the world in China. In the 1970s, before reforms were first introduced, China had already begun to improve relations with the U.S. and had normalized relations with most developed countries including European ones and Japan by the time it began reforms. Such a favorable external environment contributed to the success of the reforms.³³ Foreign trade, which was very small in the past, has increased rapidly, and foreign direct investment poured in, particularly into its special economic zones.

The Kim Jong-un regime also acknowledged the benefits of improving foreign economic relations and expressed its intention to attract foreign enterprises into special economic zones and economic development zones.³⁴ However, unlike the Chinese government which led the development and operation of its special economic zones, the regime has tried to entrust the entire economic zone projects to foreign developers without any effort to improve the country's poor business environment. As a result, the projects did not go well, and are now completely abandoned.

Furthermore, the regime conducted several nuclear tests and test-launches of its ballistic missiles in 2016-2017 to which the United Nations Security Council responded by imposing much stronger economic sanctions, further damaging North Korea's foreign economic relations. Moreover, remaining trade has all but been suspended due to

33 Jonathan D. Pollack, "The Opening to America," in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 15: The People's Republic of China, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution, 1966-1982*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 402-472.

34 Myung-Cheol Cha, *Major Economic Zones in Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Language Press of DPRK, 2018), 1-43 [in Korean]; Moon-Soo Yang, Seok-ki Lee, and Suk-Jin Kim, *Plans to Support North Korea's Special Economic Zones and Economic Development Zones* (Sejong: Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, 2015), 23-54 [in Korean]; Ho-Yeol Lim and Joon-Young Kim, "Economic Development Zones in North Korea: Current Status and Future Tasks," World Economy Brief, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (2015.4.10.), 1-13. [in Korean]

the regime's decision to close its borders after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such extreme isolation is a very unfavorable environment for promoting its economic reform.

5. Recent Tightening of Control and the Future of Reform

The economic recovery from 2012 to 2016 during the early years of the Kim Jong-un regime may be attributed to informal marketization and expansion of trade with China.³⁵ Had the regime further committed to its economic reform under these more favorable conditions, it might have been able to achieve better results, although the positive effects of the reform seem to have been limited.

North Korea's economic policy, however, appears to be changing in the deteriorating economic conditions after the failure of its '2016-2020 five-year economic development strategy'³⁶ as a result of sanctions as well as further isolation precipitated by COVID-19. At the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) held in January 2021, the regime stated that "the state's unified guidance and strategic management of economic projects need to be strengthened," and that the new five-year economic development plan is premised on "the responsibility and centrality of the cabinet on economic projects."³⁷ Moreover, during the 2nd plenary session of the 8th WPK Central Committee held in February, it was stressed that "special interests and departmentalism that obstruct the implementation of the Party's decisions need to be sternly punished by the authority of the Party, the laws, and the military."³⁸ These recent policies that emphasize centralized control give the

35 Byung-Yeon Kim, "North Korean Economy under the Kim Jong-un Regime," *North Korea Today vol. II*, ed. Yong-kwan Yoon (Seoul: Neul-Poom Plus, 2019), 71-105 [in Korean]; Suk-Jin Kim, "Recent Research on the North Korean Economy: A Review Essay," *Journal of Peace and Unification Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 33-78 [in Korean]; Jae Hwan Hong, *North Korean Economy under the Kim Jong-un Regime* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2017), 13-143. [in Korean]

36 Suk-Jin Kim, "Why did North Korea's Five-Year Development Strategy Fail?," Online Series CO 21-06 (Korea Institute for National Unification, Feb. 24, 2021).

37 "On the Dear Comrade Kim Jong-un's Report to the Eighth Congress of Workers' Party of Korea," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 8, 2021. [in Korean]

impression that the economic reform that initially promoted decentralization and marketization might be losing traction.

Centralized control is not a new policy, but rather a principle that the regime has traditionally abided by. While it may seem that "the state's unified guidance" may be at odds with its reforms of economic management, this may not necessarily be the case. North Korea's economic reform has not been comprehensively market-oriented, but instead partial and limited in that it has only sought to improve management methods of the state-run sector without any significant privatization. This implies that centralized control and discipline are still necessary for core sectors of the national economy, even if decentralization and marketization are pursued. It is because the internal links within the state-run sector may collapse if these dual processes are promoted unrestrained.

'Perestroika,' pursued by the former Soviet Union in the late-1980s, was also a partial reform that attempted to maintain the state-owned economy while promoting decentralization and marketization. China's reform in the 1980s, when it comes to the industrial sector in urban areas, had similar features. However, while China achieved rapid economic growth, the former Soviet Union fell into a severe economic crisis and collapsed. The most reliable view on the cause of the difference explains that while China persisted in controlling major parts of its state economy, the former Soviet Union failed to do the same, allowing the managers of state-owned enterprises to misappropriate supplies and products for their private interests and subsequently break the internal linkage system within the state economy.³⁹

This suggests that the unified guidance and control of the state, as well as the central role of the cabinet emphasized by the Kim regime, may have

38 "Report on the Second Plenary Session of the Eighth Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 12, 2021. [in Korean]

39 Kevin M. Murphy, Andrei Shleifer, and Robert W. Vishny, "The Transition to a Market Economy: Pitfalls of Partial Reform," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 107, no. 3 (1992): 889-906.

some merits. But on the other hand, it seems likely that reinforcement of centralized control by the regime might harm the original objectives of the reform. This is because officials in charge of actually implementing reforms are not sure how much they can exercise their autonomy and are more worried about the danger of political persecution as political and ideological controls are further strengthened.

As observed in the past in China and Vietnam, reforms can gradually be expanded while maintaining state control over key sectors of the economy when there is a favorable external environment. However, North Korea currently faces the opposite situation. The strict sanctions enforced by the international community are not only unfavorable in themselves, but also could lead to more extreme political and ideological conservatism as the sanctions are viewed as a serious threat against the regime. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to expect stable implementation of an economic reform that could fundamentally expand the economic freedom of its people.

6. Conclusion

The Kim Jong-un regime has sought to improve the productivity of state-owned enterprises and collective farms, the two main pillars of its socialist economy, by granting greater managerial autonomy and material incentives. This may be viewed as a somewhat rational and progressive policy considering how it promotes decentralization and marketization in the state-run sector.

However, it is considerably more limited than that of China in the 1980s, which began privatization from the onset of its reform process. Unlike China, collective farms have not been disbanded nor have new non-state enterprises developed in the industrial sector. Considering that privatization is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship, the basic driving force of economic growth, this reform is not expected to stimulate long-term growth.

The limited nature of reform is closely related to the political challenge and external environment the regime faces. The Chinese Communist Party was able to vastly lessen political and ideological control while still maintaining political stability during the reform process. Moreover, China had normalized relations with most developed countries including the U.S. by the time it began reforms, and then expanded rapidly its foreign trade and attracted direct investment from foreign enterprises. In stark contrast, North Korea still has an extremely repressive hereditary dictatorship and has brought about its global isolation by threatening the international community with the development of weapons of mass destruction.

The economic crisis in North Korea is worsening due to UN Security Council sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. The growth of the North Korean economy during the first five years of the Kim Jong-un era has since transformed into the subsequent five years of economic decline and stagnation. The regime has responded to sanctions with extreme policies of self-reliance and stronger domestic control. These circumstances make it hard for the regime to create meaningful results from executing economic reforms.

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Foreign Policy of Kim Jong Un's 10 Years: Relentless Maneuvering among Options

Ildo Hwang*

This paper summarizes the political directions Pyongyang has displayed in its nuclear diplomacy for the past ten years in a time sequential manner. The particular focus has been on Pyongyang's insistence on maintaining various options to choose from and its political ability to materialize them. The study has looked into North Korea's major policy transitions and the changes in position prominently demonstrated in its diplomacy with the U.S., China, and South Korea.

During the period studied, Pyongyang has shown flexible attitudes, which include: 1) its radical transition from aggressive nuclear and missile capacity building to returning to the negotiation table; 2) its transition of the main issue from demanding corresponding security measures to demanding sanctions relief; 3) its transition of the up-front goal from showing off its retaliation deterrence capacity to strike the U.S. mainland to completion of nuclear war-fighting capabilities in the regional arena; and 4) its transition from hedging against China, focusing on its possible negotiation with the U.S., to hedging against the U.S., focusing on its possible closer ties with China. Such flexibility has been quite successful as a way to realize the strategic objectives that North Korea wanted to achieve in the first place.

Keywords: Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative, Nuclear negotiation with North Korea, Pendulum diplomacy, the U.S-China Rivalry, Sanctions

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I . Introduction

North Korea's movement for the past ten years under the Kim Jong Un regime can be interpreted from various points of view, but at its core, there lies an undeniable national strategic goal of "completion of a reliable nuclear force." This goal best explains North Korea's economic and social policies, as well as its diplomatic moves to key countries such as the U.S, China, and South Korea. In short, North Korea's foreign policies for the past ten years can be summarized as a process through which it has been trying to realize possible paths catered to the changing situation. However, at all times, it has never stopped prioritizing its nuclear force as its prime value.

From this vantage point, it is believed that North Korea's foreign policy during Kim Jong Un's time in power can be divided into four stages: 1) Phase 1 began right after Kim Jong Un took control. He struck an agreement with the U.S. on February 29, but the deal swiftly collapsed. 2) Phase 2 lasted from 2016 to 2017, when the focus was on repeated missile launches and nuclear tests to extend North Korea's ICBM range to reach the U.S. mainland. 3) Phase 3 covers the year 2018 and the first half of 2019, specifically until the Hanoi Summit, when the effort was made to secure economic rewards, such as lifting sanctions, in return for giving up the "nuclear future" by shutting down the Yongbyon site. 4) Phase 4 began in mid-2019, when it became clear that North Korea's diplomatic endeavor in Phase 3 had ended in nothing but failure. The focus was now on achieving the modernization and sophistication of short-range missiles to achieve nuclear war-fighting capabilities that can best be utilized within the region, including the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, North Korea seems to have been seeking ways to be recognized as an official nuclear state, leveraging the ongoing strategic rivalry between China and the U.S.

The point is that, looking back, Pyongyang does not seem to have displayed a willful and inflexible movement toward its predetermined goals. For example, in 2018, when North Korea thought it faced an impasse in achieving its goal of building a complete nuclear deterrent, it pondered deeply to come up with other policy options to use as a bypass or

alternatives to overcome the challenge. This explains North Korea's tendency to be evasive, as it least appreciates a situation that has only a single option or path—North Korea always tries to maintain a variety of options to enjoy the best flexibility.

When we think about the discourses or political assets that Chairman Kim mobilized before the Hanoi Summit, we cannot say that his moves were all simply deceptive or that they were measures to delay time. To put it differently, it seems evident that North Korea included the option to give up its nuclear development capacity in a limited scope after considering the actual feasibility of completing nuclear deterrent, the efficacy of its nuclear forces, and its possible side effects and aftermath. When that option was smashed in Hanoi, it swiftly moved to another playbook that is, prioritizing the short-range capability that could be best utilized in the region while continuing to leverage the U.S-China rivalry.

As such, this study aims to summarize North Korea's flexible policy maneuvering for the past 10 years in a time-sequential manner. While doing so, it will look more closely at North Korea's preference for retaining a wide variety of options as possible and the changes in its relations with the U.S., China, and South Korea. To do this, it will be necessary to focus on prominent cases where North Korea chose to make a sudden transition in its policies or positions. Indeed, such a tendency is not a characteristic unique to the Kim Jong Un regime only, but is a pattern that has become all the more conspicuous as North Korea's nuclear build-up has gotten on the full-fledged track.

II. 2012~2015: A time of confusion or preparation

Since the demise of the former chairman of North Korea, Kim Jong Il, in December 2011, the Kim Jong Un regime has spent a significant amount of time solidifying its power and stabilizing its internal political landscape. The character of this period is well represented by several executions: those of General Ri Yong-ho, Director Jang Song-thaek, and Defense

Minister Hyon Yong-chul. Considering the level of domestic political instability, it is only natural that we didn't see a specific direction in its foreign policy during that time. Therefore, it is safe to say that North Korea experienced a high level of confusion in its foreign policy. At best, one can see this period as a time of readying its nuclear/missile capability for further strengthening. In particular, with regard to nuclear negotiation with the U.S., Kim Jong Un was still in an immature stage and did not know how to handle the power that had just been handed over to him. Thus, it is relatively more difficult to deeply analyze his foreign policies during this time.

A definitive case in point was North Korea's agreement with the U.S. on February 29, 2012, and its quick collapse. As noted, in April 2012, Kim Jong Un officially took the position of First Chairman of the National Defense Commission and the First Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea. In other words, the deal with the Obama administration was discussed, agreed, and then collapsed all before the official formation of the Kim Jong Un regime. It has been well acknowledged that the agreement was mainly about North Korea's consent to suspend missile launches and nuclear tests and the nuclear moratorium at the Yongbyon Site, including the uranium enrichment in return for 240 million metric tons of nutrition support from the U.S. However, on April 14, just two months after the deal was struck, North Korea blatantly carried out a long-range missile launch, arguing that it was part of the space program and for peaceful purposes.

In fact, it was just two weeks after the deal was made, when Pyongyang announced its satellite launch plan in March, insisting that this rocket was irrelevant to the missile moratorium, as it was solely to advance its satellite system. However, those sitting at the negotiation table on the U.S. side recalled that the North was fully aware that such "satellite launch" should be enough to make the deal fall through, and there should have been no way for Pyongyang to be too naive not to know such simple fact. It had been a crystal-clear principle long before the negotiation that any rocket launch should be considered equivalent to an ICBM.¹

Against this backdrop, one conclusion we can draw is that the Kim Jong Un regime either tried its best to ignore or dared to risk the possible collapse of the agreement. Either way, it is not easy for us to determine why it agreed to strike a deal in the first place. In the preceding research, various scholars brought up diverse analyses, noting that: 1) As the negotiation had been initiated during the Kim Jong Il era, Kim Jong Un was not subject to the content of the agreement; 2) Kim Jong Un took a hardline position in the early stages of his regime to show off his strong leadership image; and 3) during this time, the nuclear diplomacy strategy of North Korea took a radical turn from a denuclearization negotiation to a priority on nuclear possession.²

Although nobody was sure how well thought out the change was, everybody knew that it carried huge repercussions. As noted, the Obama administration, which was determined to have a nuclear negotiation with North Korea in its early years, quickly lost trust in Pyongyang and changed its stance to so-called "strategic patience." There were discussions of possible negotiations with North Korea at times, but they failed to gain momentum. Moreover, as President Biden took office in 2021, the key players who led this process during the Obama administration returned to their key positions in U.S. diplomacy. Their painful memory of the agreement in 2012 is limiting the Biden administration's negotiation options with North Korea, and the Kim Jong Un regime seems to be paying a huge price for the confusing decisions it made in the early stages of its foreign policy.

1 Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A contemporary history* (UK: Hachette, 2013), ch. 19.

2 Refer to Jin-Ha Kim, "The Revisionist Origins of North Korea's Militaristic and Coercive Diplomacy," *Defense Study* 63, no. 1 (2020); Sangkeun Lee, "Kim Jong-Un's Leadership and North Korea's Foreign Policy Change," *Korea and World Politics* 33, no. 4 (2017); Sukhoon Hong, "An Analysis of Kim Jong-un's New Foreign Policy Orientations and Strategies," *The Journal of Political Science & Communication* 18, no. 2 (2015) for relevant preceding research.

A similar example occurred around the time of the execution of Jang Song-thaek in December 2013. Pyongyang carried out its third nuclear test before President Xi in China took office in March 2013. Moreover, the regime executed Jang Song-thaek, who had been in charge of the North Korea-China economic cooperation project since the Kim Jong Il era. After the execution, all relevant joint ventures and projects were wasted, the China-North Korea economic cooperation entered into an unprecedented slumber, and relations between the two countries suffered a long cooling-off period until 2018.

As noted, Jang Song-thaek's execution is generally understood to have occurred as a result of power politics in Pyongyang. Especially according to the mainstream analysis, he was embroidered in ever worsening conflicts with powerful agencies such as the North Korean People's Army and the State Security Department, as he tried to deprive them of the privilege to earn foreign hard currency via autonomous export of natural resources, and monopolize the business to the Party only.³ From this point of view, it is true that after the execution of Jang, the Kim Jong Un regime was able to stabilize its reigning power successfully. Nevertheless, this event left a massive scar in North Korea's relationship with China, meaning that Pyongyang made choices that cooled its relationship with the U.S. and China simultaneously during this period. It was an unusual decision even for North Korea, which has had quite a unique diplomacy pattern.

Such limitations were repeated in its nuclear/missile capability development, following a similar pattern. North Korea launched its missiles three or four times annually from 2012–2013 but suddenly increased its launches in 2014. However, such an increase did not have much technological significance as they were all more or less simple demonstrations meant to show off its strong image to the outside world by utilizing the existing weapon systems of KN-01, KN-02, FROG, Scud, and

3 Hyeong Jung Park et al., "The Dynamics of the Competition for Power and Interest under Suryong Dictatorship and the Purge of Jang Sung-thaek," *North Korean Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2014).

Rodong.⁴ It was true that North Korea made certain level of achievements by launching long-range rockets during this time, which allowed it to verify the trajectory control and stage separation technology necessary for ICBM development. However, the Rodong engine clustering technology used here was different from the ICBM finally completed after 2017. The only prominent result related to North Korea's missile capability-building effort was the SLBM ejection test from the Sinpo-class submarine in May 2015.

In other words, during this time, North Korea's foreign policy displayed neither clear direction nor particular achievement from the perspective of nuclear capabilities build-up or its negotiation effort. Instead, it displayed a confusing pattern in its decision-making. Based on this, we can only assume that the Kim Jong Un regime put much heavier weight on domestic political stability and solidifying his legitimacy during those years and utilized foreign policy to achieve this internal goal.⁵ Under such logic, the main elements of foreign policy had to be put on the back burner and settled far behind the domestic policy. Since this period, the outside world has started to build a biased perceptual framework to interpret the country's every single external move as a result of internal factors.

However, we should consider a few measures that North Korea carried out in the latter part of 2015. For example, Chairman Kim, during this time, made a total generation change. He replaced all the personnel in charge of missile capability development, appointing Ri Man-gon as director of the Party's Munitions Industry Department (MID), Ri Pyong-chol as first deputy director of MID, and Kim Jong-sik as deputy director of MID.⁶ These

4 CSIS Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present," Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 29, 2021, accessed November 12, 2011, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>.

5 Jongjoo Lee, "A Study on Kim Jong-un's Coercive Diplomacy and Nuclear Weapons," *North Korean Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (2019): 98, 202.

6 Min Hong, "Analysis on North Korea's Main Nuclear-Missile Activities," *KINU Insight*, no. 1, Korea Institute for National Unification (2017), 26-30.

are the key figures who have successfully built up the country's missile capability until recently. In addition, some analysis suggests that the RD-250 engine design from the former Soviet Union, a prototype of the Paektusan engine, was first acquired around this time.⁷ Against this backdrop, we can evaluate that technical preparation was completed during this phase to initiate the nuclear build-up process in earnest from 2016.

III. 2016~2017: Changes in attitude dependent on technological confidence⁸

Looking at North Korea's nuclear/missile development process, one cannot miss the clear characteristics displayed during the two-year period from its fourth nuclear test in January 2016 to the test launch of the Hwasung-15 type in November 2017. Compared to the previous phases during which its nuclear/missile capability had been demonstrated only intermittently, during those years, North Korea was able to enhance its capacity according to a very compressed development schedule. Regarding this progress, North Korea used the term "Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative," implying that it had set a frame differentiated from all the other development phases.⁹

7 Michael Elleman, "The secret to North Korea's ICBM success," *Survival* 59, no. 5 (2017).

8 Part of content in this section is based on the analysis results contained in Ildo Hwang, "Analysis on Two Years of North Korea's Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 6, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2018), which was later revised to fit an academic article format and reflected in this paper.

9 It was not until the DPRK Nuclear Laboratory Statement declared right after the 5th nuclear test in September 2016 that the North Korean state broadcast outlet and official announcement started to adopt the phrase, "according to the DPRK Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative." The same expression appeared in the same vein when the same agency announced the same statement upon the completion of the 6th nuclear test in September 2017. Compared to this, in January 2016 when the 4th nuclear test took place,

The distinguishing point of Pyongyang's relevant activities at that time was particularly revealed in its specific sequencing. For example, since 2006, it used to conduct its nuclear tests when tensions in the international community intensified, following the country's long-range missile launch and when the UN Security Council started to discuss concrete sanction measures. For North Korea, a nuclear test was a tool to protest against the international community, which "unduly oppressed North Korea and tried to prevent it from enjoying its due right to hold a rocket launch." Conversely, in January 2016, North Korea carried out its fourth nuclear test, at an unexpected time point when it did not launch a rocket at all. During its first to third nuclear tests, Pyongyang put much effort into attracting the attention of the U.S. and the international community. Since its fourth nuclear test, however, the focus has been on literal nuclear technology development.

In the same vein, until 2016, the missile launch had been centered on the old short-range platform that had already been deployed. Since 2016, on the other hand, it has launched missiles with various engines, such as Musudan, Paektusan, and Bukguksong within a brief time interval, demonstrating its differentiated missile capability. Based on this, we can assume that the primary goal of the Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative was to make North Korea's nuclear delivery capability a given fact, and for this, Pyongyang tried to verify the relevant technologies that it had had long possessed but had not disclosed.

it was only expressed as "according to WPK's strategic decision," and even such an expression was not founded in previous nuclear tests. Because the 7th Congress of the WPK was held in May 2016 between the 4th and 5th nuclear test, it should be a reasonable assumption that the term "Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative" was officially adopted in the meeting. As noted, the 7th Congress was a venue that made the "Five-Year Economic Strategy" official under the basis of the dual policy of nuclear and economic development initiated in 2013. In other words, the Strategic Nuclear Force Construction Initiative and Five-Year Economic Strategy started to represent the specific two pillars of its long-held dual policy. Refer to Hwang, "Analysis on Two Years of North Korea's Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative": 3-5 for more information.

During this period, North Korea's attitude toward nuclear negotiation can be divided into three stages. The first stage was from January 2016 to March 2017, when the launches were centered on Scud, Rodong, and Musudan. Here, Pyongyang displayed a relatively open attitude towards negotiation. A case in point was North Korea's remarks about its prospects on dialogue in May 2016. Back then, Pyongyang sent positive signals in various forms, including: 1) a public letter from the NDC that proposed a two-Korea military dialogue calling for a positive response from the South; 2) remarks by Kim Ki-Nam, Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department, who said "anybody who wishes to improve relations should come to the negotiation table for communication"; 3) remarks by the chief director of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland, who said "Instead of listing unjust preconditions such as nuclear abandonment, we need to start a dialogue right away"; and 4) a letter from People's Armed Forces' General Political Bureau, which called for a military dialogue.

By the end of 2016, on the major 1.5 track dialogues, key players in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in North Korea maintained their stance that the "dual freeze" concept could be discussed through which both ROK-US military drills and North Korea's nuclear/missile test would be simultaneously suspended. Simply put, during this stage, North Korea called for a dialogue as soon as possible, whereas the U.S. and South Korea refused to participate, insisting on denuclearization measures as a precondition.

One of the reasons behind North Korea's attitude might be the disappointing performance of the Musudan engine, the original technology for mid-/long-range missiles. As opposed to the estimates about dozens of Musudan missiles already deployed in the field, only one out of the eight missile tests was found to be successful. KN-08 and KN-14, demonstrated previously during military parades, were all based on the clustering of the Soviet 4D-10 engine, which was also used for the Musudan missile. Therefore, such failures of the Musudan missiles meant that there would be technical uncertainties when developing IRBM or ICBM, which

had both been expected to fly longer and farther than the Rodong missile.

As mentioned above, the diplomatic stance of the North at that point was a pretty unusual pattern for Pyongyang to propose. Such an exceptional move should have something to do with its failures in the Musudan missile, which exposed its low missile capability and limitations in its usable doctrine. This development leads to another hypothesis: After launching Musudan missiles several times, North Korea found that the results were not as good as expected, and its technical prospects for ICBM became quite uncertain. Therefore, North Korea ended up doubting whether to use it as a possible play card for a negotiation.

The second stage was from March to November 2017. On March 18, North Korea successfully conducted a rocket launch test with an advanced Soviet RD-250 engine. This engine was later named a "Paektusan engine," and it was, two months later in May, used for Hwasong-12 IRBM and was successfully launched. Another two months later in July, the engine was built into Hwasong-14 ICBM and was launched successfully two times in a row. Lastly, the North made another successful ICBM missile launch with Hwasong-15 in November. All of the new mid-/long-range missiles with demonstrated flight performance were made possible by the clustering of the Paektusan engine. To attest to this, the Musudan missile disappeared after its last test in April 2017, along with KN-08 and KN-14, which were not demonstrated in a military parade until February 2018. Since then, mid-/long-range ground-to-ground missile forces have all been reconstituted with the Paektusan engine variants, and they still maintain such a posture today. In other words, the acquisition of the engine can be considered as the turning point that finally completed Pyongyang's long-range missile technology.

At the same time, the North started to take a hardline stance on dialogues or negotiations. Equally notable were North Korea's remarks that appeared in the *Rodong Sinmun* on September 22, 2017, regarding the "path of the China case." After China carried out its first nuclear test in 1964 and a hydrogen bomb test in 1968, the Nixon administration started its

détente with China in earnest in 1972. After this, the two countries normalized their relations, and the U.S. accepted China becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. North Korea kept using this reference in various central broadcast outlets and public papers, proclaiming itself as a state that had successfully developed nuclear/hydrogen bombs and ICBM, just like China in the past. It repeatedly suggested the idea of a "normalization of relations" between the DPRK and the U.S as proper nuclear states. By saying "Just as the U.S. came to détente with China in 1970, it can do the same with North Korea," Pyongyang started to proclaim itself as, *by fait accompli*, a "nuclear power."

Once this had become a basic premise of its frame, ICBM technology was considered the core leverage that makes an actual negotiation between nuclear states possible. Therefore, for the North, the best way to maximize the possibility of becoming a nuclear state was to show off its ICBM technology as soon as and as reliably as possible. Since then, the regime has started to maintain a significantly hardline position regarding possible dialogue or negotiation on nuclear issues, including the "dual freeze" concept. A reasonable hypothesis that can rightly explain the situation is this: As the technology to complete the ICBM was placed within reach, North Korea set a new target to "complete the capability as soon as possible despite any challenges" by quickly scrapping its previous option of "using the current state of the process as a playing card to trade the best we can get in return."

The third stage occurred from November 2017 to the opening of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games and was characterized by specified responses of the U.S. to Pyongyang's moves. During this time, the Trump administration swiftly realized various measures through the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy, and the Nuclear Posture Review. The measures taken here included: 1) bolstering its missile defense capacity by reinforcing the ground interceptors in Alaska; 2) adopting SLBM and SLCM mounting low nuclear yield warheads; 3) developing a deployment plan of the Aegis Ashore Defense system by Japan; and 4) deploying the USFK THAAD system. These measures were

a summarized response to North Korea from the U.S, sending the message that the U.S. can easily deter North Korea's limited number of missiles with its enhanced interception capability. This was a clear expression from Washington that there is no way the U.S would, albeit tacitly, acknowledge North Korea's nuclear projection capability to the U.S. mainland and have an "arms control negotiation" with North Korea.

As the U.S. sent a clear signal on its unwavering stance through public documents and a chain of announcements, North Korea made a subtle change in its attitude towards negotiation. The change started with an article published in *The Choson Sinbo* newspaper on February 12, 2018, in which North Korea alluded to the possibility of a nuclear/missile moratorium under the premise of a continued two-Korea dialogue. The article said that "a resumption of ROK-US military drills will destroy the inter-Korea relation," urging South Korea and the U.S. to join the "dual freeze" frame. As noted, such changes in the atmosphere led up to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games in February, the two-Korea summit in April, and the U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore in June.

Back then, the reasons behind the North coming back to the negotiation table with the dual freeze frame as its precondition could be as follows: 1) Even if the ICBM technology were completed, it is not likely for them to see a fundamental improvement in their nuclear deterrence structure against the U.S.; and 2) the mutual nuclear deterrence structure is impossible to build without accumulating enough ICBMs to exceed the saturation point of the U.S. missile defense system or making a second-strike capability to the U.S. by demonstrating long-range SLBM capability. To achieve the capability mentioned above would take a significant amount of time, considering the technical development status of the country. Therefore, the North likely concluded that it did not mean much even if they repeatedly show off ICBM technology further. Instead, what would be strategically more meaningful would be to keep a variety of options on the table, including negotiation, while leaving in place a certain level of ambiguity regarding ICBM capabilities.

This summary shows that North Korea's Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative, as opposed to its initial big picture, has experienced significant ups and downs. Their first option for an ICBM engine based on Musudan, which had already been deployed, suffered from a disastrous failure. Again, the North believed that the U.S. would, albeit reluctantly, accept a "nuclear arms control" frame for negotiation, if they demonstrated its initial technology path or rudimentary ICBM technology. However, this rosy picture also collapsed at an early stage. When faced with these setbacks, Pyongyang did not rigidly adhere to its original plan nor approach it. Instead, it repeatedly changed its policy in an impromptu manner, reflecting the limitations of each weapon system and a nuclear doctrine full of weaknesses.

In particular, the change in the North's attitude toward diplomatic solutions meant that in the process, they had made a significant change in direction by reflecting the verified level of internal capability and changes in the external environment. Regarding Pyongyang's transition to a negotiating phase in 2018, many speculated that it must have been based on confidence that it had completed more than a certain level of nuclear capability. However, if we cautiously reflect on what was happening back then, North Korea was more open to negotiations or dialogue when it believed that the goal was not easy to reach.

Additionally, the same logic can be applied when we consider that North Korea promoted the long-range missile technology development process with multiple engines such as Musudan, Paektusan, and Pukgukseong as options. For North Korea, it was evident that if it relies solely on a single engine and should it fail, the repercussions would be disastrous. In fact, such a nightmare became reality when North Korea witnessed repeated Musudan missile launch failures in 2016. In other words, North Korea secured multiple engine options prior to its commitment to the Strategic Nuclear Forces Construction Initiative,¹⁰ and this would be a case in which the North's behavioral pattern, such as the

10 Elleman, "The secret to North Korea's ICBM success."

continuous pursuit of diversified options, can be glimpsed in terms of the technological aspect.

IV. 2018~2019: Transition between security corresponding measures and lifting of sanctions

There can be various evaluations from end to end, regarding the results and implications of North Korea's active engagement with the outside world that started in 2018. On one hand, it might be interpreted as a deceptive tactic of Pyongyang to avoid the possible military option taken by the Trump administration, while on the other hand, Pyongyang might have made such a decision with its decisive willingness to denuclearize, but that chance was lost due to the rigid decision-making system inside the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, what is obvious is that we have seen some signs that make it difficult to dismiss that Kim Jong Un's summit diplomacy was simply a tactic of deception. As noted, during this time, state media outlets used phrases such as "earth-shaking diplomacy" to emphasize that Chairman Kim's "creative move" transcended the existing perception framework or fault line in the international landscape, such as imperialism vs. anti-imperialism.¹¹ What is more, prior to the Hanoi Summit, North Korean media outlets delivered Chairman Kim's diplomatic moves in detail to residents almost in real time. In case of a summit failure, those reports would have directly contradicted and undermined the belief that "Chairman Kim never gets anything wrong." Thus, such an enthusiastic news tone showed Pyongyang's high expectation on positive results of the Summit.

Particularly noteworthy is that North Korea's official discourse

11 Ildo Hwang, "North Korea's Recent Perception on International Political Landscape: Implication on Nuclear Negotiation," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 36, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2019): 1.

explained that its diplomatic moves during this period were meant to "create an external environment favorable to economic development." In the same context, key players who can be classified as Kim's aides visited China and Vietnam ahead of the Singapore and Hanoi Summit to conduct a field inspection program related to the economic development model. In short, there is no doubt that the primary purpose of negotiations during this period was to lay the foundation for economic development by solving the issue of sanctions.

Before and after adopting the All-out Efforts Concentration Policy to Build a Socialist Economy at a plenary session of the Party's Central Committee in April 2018, North Korea carried out large-scale recreational facility construction projects in major tourist areas such as Wonsan Kalma and Samjiyon. In particular, in the case of the Wonsan Kalma Tourist Zone, Chairman Kim Jong Un personally took an inspection tour on May 25,¹² shortly after North Korea blew up its nuclear test facility in Punggye-ri ahead of the Singapore Summit. As noted, tourism is not subject to the sanctions on North Korea. At this time, Pyongyang seems to have been considering ways to: 1) Acquire at least a small amount of foreign currency to survive by at least attracting foreign tourists; 2) resume exports of significant items such as coal and iron ore to bring back its foreign currency supply to its pre-2016 levels; or 3) help state-owned factories or companies to receive foreign direct investment by completely lifting all the sanctions.

12 Peter Makowsky et al., "Examining Kim's Approach to Construction: Project Wonsan," *38 North*, October 16, 2020, accessed November 12, 2021, https://www.38north.org/2020/10/wonsan101620/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+38North+%2838+North%3A+Informed+Analysis+of+North+Korea%29. Since the second half of 2019, when the prospect of negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea became slim, the construction speed of the Wonsan Kalma district has been significantly delayed, and it has not yet been completed. This can also be a further proof that the construction project of major tourist resorts was closely related to the improvement of economic conditions depending on the results of nuclear negotiations.

It is also necessary to examine the military's economic role, which was starkly noticeable during this period. All of the major construction projects, including Wonsan Kalma, had been carried out on a large scale by mobilizing the People's Army, and in May 2018, Kim Soo-gil, director of the General Political Bureau, accompanied Chairman Kim's field tour of Wonsan Kalma. This trend seems to have been formalized through an Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission held on May 17, 2018, and it was reported on the front page of the *Rodong Sinmun*, that during the meeting, Chairman Kim said, "Let the People's Army take charge of both national defense and socialist economy construction."¹³ Taking a step further, Pyongyang, at that time, seemed to have been thinking of its own economic development model, in which foreign capital could be invested through the People's Army if sanctions were lifted. In other words, it is not a Vietnamese-style FDI in which each economic entity freely conducts joint ventures with the outside world, but a plan to use the People's Army as a main vehicle to control the official economy by receiving investment from other countries and distributing it to local companies and factories in special economic zones.¹⁴ This is similar to the so-called "gatekeeper model" that Cuba chose in order to maintain a socialist centralized economic model while seeking ways to attract external capital when it was suffering from difficulties due to the collapse of the socialist economy upon the end of the Cold War.¹⁵

It should be noted that North Korea took an approach that was quite different from the past, because for this time it focused on economic sanctions lift as a corresponding benefit for initial denuclearization measures. From the Inter-Korean Joint Declaration in September 2018 to the preparation period for the Hanoi Summit in February 2019, discussion

13 *Rodong Sinmun*, May 18, 2018.

14 Ildo Hwang, "Dual Structure of North Korea's Economic Development Discourse: Implications on Nuclear Negotiation," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 6, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2019): 14-15.

15 Hye Hyun Son, "New Cuban Government of Díaz-Canel: Implications and Challenges," *Analysis of Major International Issues*, no. 21, Korea National Diplomatic Academy (2018).

at the early stage of nuclear negotiation mainly centered on the topic of a permanent shutdown of the Yongbyon nuclear site. During the process, North Korea urged lifting sanctions as corresponding measures or compensational benefits in the political or security sector. The negotiation was embodied in the Hanoi meeting as a demand to lift four sanctions that had been adopted by the UN Security Council since 2016 in return for the dismantling of the Yongbyon facility.

This was quite a different move from those used by the North in the past. It usually focused on a set of security agenda items, including peace agreements, discussions of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, and termination of U.S. strategic assets deployment to the region. Examples might include: 1) In January 2015, it proposed a tentative dual freeze for both nuclear tests and for ROK-US military drills; 2) Between October and December of the same year, the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a series of statements that suggested that the peace agreement and denuclearization pursued were a single package; and 3) in July 2016, a statement was issued in the name of a DPRK spokesman, calling for "denuclearization across the whole Korean Peninsula." This stance was reaffirmed at the Singapore Summit in June 2018 through an agreement that described the effort to establish the U.S.-North Korea relations for a peace regime.¹⁶

In this regard, the North's attitude toward focusing on sanctions at the

16 For this, an informal explanation can be provided with no different context from the official statement. Between 2017 and 2019, I attended seven 1.5-track conferences overseas in which the North Korean side also participated. Until the latter part of 2018, high-ranking officials from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs mainly mentioned corresponding measures in the security sector, commonly referred to as "hostile policies," such as a withdrawal of U.S. troops or suspension of deploying strategic assets. Lifting sanctions was not discussed because the North's delegation created a hard-headed atmosphere in which it did not want to discuss lifting sanctions as a possible corresponding measure, saying, "DPRK can and will endure the sanction however long it would last." This attitude confirmed that North Korea perceived the sanctions as an issue that could degrade North Korea's reputation and weaken its negotiation leverage.

Hanoi Summit can be interpreted as follows: as the discussion developed from Singapore came to the point on detailed matters, it started to put much attention on sanction issues, in other words, rewards it can get in return for economic sector. To put it differently, it can be said that North Korea allowed a rapid shift in the focus of corresponding measures from security and political sectors to the economic sectors. It also reaffirmed that the regime's goal of negotiations at the time was to create an external environment favorable to its economic development, as proclaimed officially.

However, following the failure of the Hanoi Summit, North Korea has returned to security agenda, symbolized by the "withdrawal of the hostile policy." This regression was first mentioned during the press conference on March 15, 2019, right after the collapse of the Summit, in which Choe Son-hui, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, mentioned the "possible suspension of negotiation." It was later continued by various North Korean statements mentioning mostly the ROK-US joint military drills. Pyongyang has never clearly summarized and explained what specific issues it refers to when it comes to "the hostile policy," but one thing is obvious: North Korea has returned to the frame it had before the Singapore Summit, focusing on the military situation around the Korean Peninsula.

In the end: 1) First, Pyongyang kept mentioning a comprehensive and fundamental agenda centered on security issues when the nuclear negotiations remained stalled; and 2) second, as the negotiation came close to achieving its tangible outcome, it changed its focus from the security sector to the economic sector represented by lifting sanctions. The North argues that it has shifted to a practical issue because the two countries did not narrow their fundamental issue gap. However, on the contrary, we can use the same logic as a proof that the North is also aware that the fundamental security issues is more unrealistic or unfeasible than lifting sanctions and other economic issues.

However, it is worth to shed a light upon the level of denuclearization measures that North Korea proposed in return for lifting sanctions.

According to the Joint Declaration in September 2018, North Korea agreed to permanent disposal of the Yongbyon nuclear facility in addition to the preemptive disposal of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and the Dongchang-ri missile launch site. As noted, none of these facilities affect North Korea's already established nuclear and missile weapon system. Rather, these measures are to limit or slow down further development or capacity build-up in the future. Considering that the North showed reservations about giving up undisclosed uranium enrichment facilities outside of Yeongbyeon, which is expressed as "Yeongbyeon plus alpha," it is safe to say that for North Korea, such denuclearization measures were intended to slow down, rather than stop, its nuclear capability build-up. In short, at that time, North Korea had set a frame in which it was willing to slow down its capability development pace in return for sanctions relief.

Although the so-called "plus alpha" seems to have been discussed in a working-level talk at Stockholm for the time being,¹⁷ Pyongyang's attitude seemed that its maximum concession didn't include giving up its already established nuclear arsenals, and it did not think about abandoning the whole current nuclear capability. In other words, their ICBM capability had not secured the assured retaliation level against the U.S. mainland given its number and re-entry technology demonstrated in 2017, therefore, the North thought that a play card of temporizing the process only, at the level with (of) considerable ambiguity, could be acceptable for the U.S. side on the negotiation table. In this vein, North Korea must have anticipated that by giving out its test sites, implying its suspension on capability build-up, the U.S. might willingly alleviate or lift sanctions as a corresponding benefit.

As noted, the North's expectations were quite different from those of the Trump administration, which led to the collapse of the Hanoi

17 Jung-eun Lee and Wan-joon Yun, "Off to Stockholm, Kim Myong-gil from North Korea... New signals from the U.S.," *Dong-A Daily*, October 4, 2019, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://news.naver.com/main/read.naver?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=100&oid=020&aid=0003245072>.

negotiations. However, it can be said that North Korea's attempt to switch the corresponding action items shown in the process was an important example of what the North would demand when negotiations are really materializing. Alternatively, it is possible to hypothesize that the North also knows that the security-related issues such as the Korea-U.S. alliance and the USFK are unlikely to be realized, and they may repeatedly raise related issues just to show off its uncompromising attitude when negotiations are stalled.

V. 2019~2021: Full-fledged utilization of the U.S.–China strategic rivalry

The negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea faced a long impasse following the working-level negotiations at Stockholm in October 2019. The North, since then, has returned to a tough stance, taking up a new option that actively utilizes the so-called "New Cold War" discourse and making a boast of its close relationship with China. This approach can be summarized as an attempt to maximize their strategic value via using the U.S.-China rivalry context, since the summit diplomacy with the U.S. has not achieved significant results and the White House has shown a more reserved attitude. Additionally, they may have calculated that they could slow down the pace of economic deterioration by utilizing the rivalry structure between two great powers.

Of course, these playbooks have appeared since the first half of 2018, when the U.S. and North Korea started their leadership-led diplomacy. A case in point is that North Korea restored its relationship with China before the Singapore Summit. As explained earlier, North Korea's relationship with China experienced its worst period after the execution of Jang Sung-thaek in 2013 and China's participation in sanctions in 2016 and 2017. As it is well known, Chairman Kim visited Beijing just before the Singapore Summit to meet with President Xi Jinping, and throughout this, the two leaders emphasized their "strategic cooperation," which culminated in China providing a courtesy aircraft bound to Singapore for Chairman Kim.

The trend can be interpreted as an attempt by North Korea to increase the leverage of negotiations by having China at its back during the scheduled summit with the U.S. This was primarily meant to actively utilize President Trump's mindset, knowing that he recognized the U.S.-North Korea negotiations as a sub-variable of the U.S.-China conflict.¹⁸ Roughly speaking, North Korea has taken a double-hedging posture in negotiations with the U.S. and China, in which: 1) First, it tried to attract more active cooperation from China by demonstrating the possibility of striking a deal with the U.S.; and 2) second, it tried to obtain more concessions from the U.S. during the negotiations by reaffirming its long held friendship with China.

This was possible because North Korea understood that President Trump, at the time, had high expectations that he would be able to enjoy a competitive edge against China by pulling North Korea out of China's influence. In response to this, North Korea had sent a message that "there is no such thing as everlasting friends or everlasting foes."¹⁹ By setting up a situation in which both the U.S. and China would try to win over North Korea, it could show off the possible options, which in turn could provide a good chance to get an edge in its nuclear negotiation.

However, it can also be said that the double hedging during this period still set its center of gravity on the U.S. side. In other words, negotiations with the U.S. were the main concern, and the restoration of relations with China was a means to support this. However, while maintaining the double hedging attitude, North Korea started to gravitate back to China from the latter part of 2019. In other words, North Korea has been focusing on strengthening its close contacts and relationship with China, while

18 The substance of President Trump's perception at the time was reaffirmed in the memoirs of then National Security Advisor John Bolton. John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), ch. 4.

19 North Korea's state-run media reports revealed this stance most actively including an article titled "General Kim Jong Un, Writing a New History of Peace," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 13, 2019, published just ahead of the Hanoi Summit.

maintaining the slight possibility of negotiation with the U.S. in order to put pressure on China.

An example of this is the remarks made by Choi Ryong-hae, then First Vice Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, at the Non-Alliance Movement (NAM) Summit held in Azerbaijan in October 2019. His remarks can be summarized as follows: 1) Now is the time when invasive behavior and interference by a great imperialist power are rampant, similar to the early stage of the Cold War between the East and West; 2) the ghosts of a "New Cold War" are wandering around in various regions; and 3) therefore, countries that value justice should cooperate in the spirit of anti-imperialism and independence. This remark, in which he defines the current international situation as the "New Cold War," was formalized and distributed to residents of North Korea, as the full text was published in the *Rodong Sinmun*.²⁰

Interestingly, North Korean state media did not actively criticize the Trump administration during this period, while the *Rodong Sinmun* criticized the U.S. for its interference in China's human rights issues, and reported in detail the conflict between Russia and the NATO camp. For example, aggressive criticism towards the U.S. announced by North Korean Foreign Ministry officials before and after the working-level talks around the same time as Vice Chairman Choi's earlier remarks were rarely published in state media.

Pyongyang's behavioral pattern such as taking advantage of the

20 Hwang, "North Korea's Recent Perception on International Political Landscape": 11-12. This remark on the New Cold War is reaffirmed as follows through Chairman Kim Jong Un's policy speech at the 5th meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (17th term) on September 29, 2021 (*Rodong Sinmun*, September 30, 2021): "Among the grim challenges and crises facing humanity, at the core lies the U.S. and its followers which are tumbling down the fundamentals of international peace and stability by abusing its power and coercing countries. The U.S has been dividing the world with its unfair and unilateral foreign policies, turning the international structure into 'the new cold war.' It has multiplied the complexity of the current international landscape."

deepening U.S.-China strategic competition to make the "New Cold War" and blocization a fait accompli, and defining oneself as a leading member of the socialist and non-alliance camps against the U.S., has gradually become entrenched with the prolonged deadlock in nuclear negotiations. In particular, during the Trump administration, the North repeatedly emphasized Trump and Kim's personal friendship, leaving the possibility of negotiations reserved, in order to maintain diversification of options. But from 2021, when the Biden administration's North Korea policy review was completed, criticism of the United States and the trend of strengthening relations between Pyongyang and Beijing became clearer in earnest. Although physical and human exchanges between North Korea and China were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the two sides have shown off their highest level of friendship since the 1990s, in terms of the content and level of expression in diplomatic messages and state-run media.

From the perspective of nuclear negotiations, China, along with Russia, has recently been actively insisting on the partial relief of sanctions on North Korea as an agenda to be discussed on the UN Security Council. The main point is that it is necessary to ease sanctions related to the imports and exports of essential items. It has cited North Korea's preemptive measures such as the abolition of Punggye-ri and Dongchang-ri in 2018, arguing sanctions relief on essential items is necessary and can be made possible in the form of a snapback clause so that it can be repealed anytime. In addition, Beijing has repeatedly presented a frame for multilateralization of negotiations or resumption of six-party talks to include Russia as well as China in the picture. Such an argument is raised on the ground that the nuclear negotiations conducted under the U.S.-North Korea bilateral structure have not been successful, and officials from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs also made some remarks acknowledging China's proposal at the multilateral 1.5-track conference held at the end of 2019.²¹

21 Hwang, "North Korea's Recent Perception on International Political Landscape": 15.

That is to say, in its "pendulum diplomacy," North Korea has swung to China. Such a move is deeply related to its recent determination to build nuclear war-fighting capabilities, which would be especially effective and viable in the region. This goal was clearly revealed by North Korea's modernization program on short-range missile forces and its declaration on tactical nuclear development from the 8th Party Congress of January 2021. Pyongyang, in particular, has recently strongly reaffirmed the need for "nuclear arms control negotiations," which may be related to the "New Cold War Blocization" stance examined so far.

In October 2021, the North raised the issue of "double standards" applied to the two Koreas regarding the building up of missile capabilities, arguing that it is equally justifiable for North Korea to modernize its short-range missile and reinforce the SLBM program. In addition, it actively uses the logical frame that was prevalent during the Cold War era, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union had nuclear arms control negotiations: 1) It uses terms such as "military balance" or "stability on the Korean Peninsula"; and 2) Chairman Kim remarked that "North Korea's main enemy is neither the U.S. nor South Korea. The war itself is the enemy."²² This move can be interpreted as an attempt to make nuclear armament a *fait accompli* by equating the current situation with the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet Union and also by claiming that North Korea is a state party holding the right to participate in arms control negotiations. It is true that the logic itself of this context has been consistently maintained regardless of atmosphere surrounding the negotiations, but the recent discourse can be defined as a result of a more specific development of their "nuclear arms control negotiation" argument.

22 In this regard, North Korea's latest message includes "Chairman Kim Jong Un's speech at the National Defense Exhibition - Juche 110," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 11, 2021; "Remarks by Cho Chul-soo, head of international organization department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs," the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 3, 2021, accessed November 12, 2021, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/13381>; and "Response from the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," *Korea Central News Agency*, October 21, 2021.

Conceptually, Pyongyang's claim can be seen as an attempt to divide its capability into two separate packages: One is the punishment deterrence capability with its ICBM reaching the U.S. mainland demonstrated in 2017, and the other is the regional denial deterrence capability that it has developed since 2019.²³ Just as the negotiation of the two major Cold War camps was represented by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, North Korea's logic seems to have developed in such a way as to imply that the U.S. should accept North Korea's partial or selective abandonment among its diversified nuclear arsenals.

This negotiation frame shows that North Korea has significantly raised the "price" compared to 2018, when it was willing to stop or slow down the pace of a "nuclear future" build-up of total arsenals in exchange for lifting the sanctions. In other words, in 2018, North Korea intended to keep its punishment deterrence capability against the U.S. mainland as opaque as possible in its denuclearization approach. However, the current attitude of Pyongyang is likely to develop in the direction of preferentially discussing the one of the two axes of its arsenals, whether for the U.S. or the region, while keeping the other intact and leaving it as a long-term

23 Refer to the following research for more information regarding relevant domestic/international analysis: Adam Mount, "Conventional Deterrence of North Korea," Federation of American Scientists, December 18, 2019, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://fas.org/pub-reports/conventional-deterrence-of-north-korea/>; Ildo Hwang, "Common Pattern of Nuclear Doctrine Evolutions and North Korea's Recent Concept of Nuclear Escalation," *National Strategy* 27, no. 3 (2021); Ildo Hwang, "North Korea's Nuclear Command and Control Estimate: Variables and Trends," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 33, no. 4 (2021); Jungsup Kim, "Recent Trend in Development of Tactical-Strategic Weapons and Implication on the Evolution of Nuclear Deterrence Doctrine in North Korea Since Hanoi Summit," *Sejong Policy Brief*, no. 6, Sejong Institute (2021); Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Statement of Charles A. Richard Commander United States Strategic Command before the Senate Committee on Armed Services 13 February 2020," United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, February 13, 2020, accessed November 12, 2021, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richard_02-13-20.pdf; Shea Cotton, "Understanding North Korea's Missile Tests," Nuclear Threat Initiative, April 24, 2017, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/understanding-north-koreas-missile-tests/>.

agenda after confirming the implementation of initial corresponding measures.

Of course, even if Pyongyang formalizes this transition in frames, it will be difficult for the U.S. to accept it, in that it remains far from the fundamental goal: North Korea's denuclearization. Moreover, for the U.S., it is more unacceptable, in that such an approach would cause a conflict of interest between the United States and its allies in the region. Nevertheless, by repeatedly sending these messages, the North is likely to strive to achieve its goal of securing or maintaining nuclear forces with a certain level of military utility. In addition, North Korea seems to continue its efforts to interpret the deepening U.S.-China strategic rivalry as a new Cold War structure in order to receive tacit acknowledgement from either China or Russia of its regional denial deterrence capability build-up. And this can be a policy transition of the North to enter into the next chapter of its goal: completion of nuclear capability or recognition as a nuclear state even tacitly.

Currently, it is blocked by Covid-19 and the lockdown measures, but as soon as the situation improves, it is to be expected that North Korea will push to secure resources for its "muddling-through strategy" by resuming trade for essential items such as foods and fertilizer from China. As it is well known, these items are not subjected to UN Security Council sanctions. If the Self-reliant Economy campaign, which was formalized at the end of 2019, is combined with the external supply of these essential items, North Korea may calculate that it can minimize the economic difficulties caused by sanctions and secure the time for its full nuclear deterrent completion. If Pyongyang's deliberation proves to be successful, we can also say that its playbook in foreign policy, "maintaining strategic flexibility" that Chairman Kim consistently has pushed forward, will also be proven successful. This is the result of diplomatic strategies that have made maximum efforts to come up with multiple options and have striven to secure resources to leverage or slow down negotiations while constantly maneuvering between these options.

VI. Conclusion

One of the easiest errors to make when analyzing North Korea's foreign policy alone is misinterpreting the term "self-reliance (*Juche*).\" At first glance, it is easy to overlook this as simply a principle of maintaining a strong attitude toward hostile enemies, such as South Korea and the U.S. But the prevailing interpretation is that the initial establishment of this concept, which has been the core of the North Korean regime ideology, was significantly influenced by the August Faction Incident in 1956. In other words, the incident gave rise to the legitimate sense of the issue that any intervention by China or Soviet Union into North Korea's domestic politics should be criticized and blocked. This principle ultimately resulted in the slogan of "being self-reliant in terms of politics, economy, and military,\" as a systematic motto of the country.

Accordingly, North Korea has repeatedly shown a pattern of being fundamentally wary of situations in which it had to be unilaterally subordinate to a specific object or state. Subsequently, it chose to play pendulum diplomacy or tightrope diplomacy, actively utilizing the conflicts between China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.²⁴ This was a strategy to secure maximum political and economic benefits from both sides, even simultaneously, by either taking one side or hedging between the two countries depending on the situation and period of time.

The foreign policy shown by the Kim Jong Un regime for the past ten years, has not deviated significantly from this trajectory. Although the regime experienced great confusion in its early days, we can confirm that North Korea has always prioritized the maintenance of multiple options. It has set its primary strategic goals in an orderly fashion, but if difficulties arise in realizing them, it has not hesitated to adjust the goals themselves flexibly. In other words, the Kim Jong Un regime has made considerable

24 Soo Ho Lim, "Foreign Policy and Foreign Relation in Post Cold-War Era," in *Modern North Korea Studies*, ed. Dal-joong Chang (Seoul: Contemporary Critics, 2013), 107-109.

efforts to avoid being driven into a situation in which there is only one option. It has created domestic and international conditions and environments that can help maintain or exert such elasticity. Because of this, it has not been easy to play a game of diplomacy with North Korea under the premise that the country will eventually yield if others are able to drive it to a single unavoidable conclusion.

We cannot deny that the Kim Jong Un regime, by utilizing these options so actively, was able to achieve a significant success. North Korea first developed its lowest level of punishment deterrence capability against the U.S. mainland in 2016–2017, which was a remarkable achievement, especially compared to the rudimentary military utility of the nuclear force in the regime's early days. Since 2019, it has been stepping up its efforts to solidify its regional nuclear war-fighting capabilities while playing more ambiguous game when it comes to its strategic capabilities against the U.S. mainland. Looking just at the results so far, it can be said that North Korea has made a considerable accomplishment in achieving a significant portion of its original goals. Moreover, no one can confidently underestimate the likelihood of its realizing remaining goals in the future.

We need to deeply ponder the fact that North Korea tends to maintain various options to choose from and has made quite a few achievements thanks to such behavior patterns. This naturally leads to the conclusion that it can be difficult for us to achieve meaningful results by playing an all or nothing game with the country. This is all the more true in the current situation, in which Pyongyang's nuclear capability is crossing the threshold of maturation. In particular, considering the context of the U.S.-China relations, it is becoming even more difficult to devise out certain measures that could drive the North into a unilateral corner. Instead, the growing possibility is that Pyongyang will reiterate salami tactics and the negotiation frame of selective denuclearization, and this must be one of the most serious crisis factors related to the North Korean nuclear problem that we are witnessing now.

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A General Assessment of 10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime: In the Areas of the Military and Security

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North Korea's military power and its military strategy have changed over the past ten years of the Kim Jong-un regime. North Korea's nuclear capabilities have crossed the threshold and have begun to function as a nuclear deterrent against external military threats. North Korea is currently seeking to enhance the credibility of its nuclear deterrent while also trying to expand its applicability. In terms of conventional capabilities, North Korea has moved away from its policy of maintaining a large military to pursue modernization of weapons systems since declaring the completion of its nuclear deterrent. But the security issue remains a difficult problem for the regime even after the development of nuclear weapons because it will need to respond to both high-level and low-level threats unless the security environment improves.

Keywords: Kim Jong-un, Development of nuclear weapons, Nuclear deterrence strategy, Conventional military strategy, Modernization of weapons systems

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1. Introduction

Ten years have passed since Kim Jong-un became leader and Supreme Commander of North Korea. Uncertainty on the Korean peninsula began to rise in 2009 when preparations for Kim Jong-un's succession began. This was also a period that illustrated how North Korea may conduct strategic and conventional provocations for political purposes, evidenced by the second nuclear test, launching of long-range missiles, the sinking of the *Cheonan*, and shelling of Yeonpyeong island. And after Kim Jong-il's death following a massive heart attack on December 17, 2011, Kim Jong-un was announced as "an excellent leader of the Party, military, and the people of North Korea," and the North Korean military vowed its loyalty to their new Supreme Commander on December 31 soon after Kim Jong-il's funeral concluded. It has been a decade since then.

How has North Korea's military and security changed over the past decade? This article seeks to comprehensively understand changes to the North Korean military by reviewing this period. Visible changes include North Korea's development of nuclear warheads and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). To assess the impact of the regime's development of its nuclear weapons, this study will analyze North Korea's military power by separately examining its nuclear and conventional capabilities. Moreover, the article will also divide the past ten years into three specific periods for analysis; from 2012 to 2015 during which the Byungjin policy announced in 2013 was pursued, from 2016 to 2017 when the accomplishments of the Byungjin policy were confirmed, and from 2018 to 2021 when a new military policy was adopted following the completion of its nuclear arsenal.

Although Pyongyang's military force-building efforts are not insulated from North Korea's external relations, this article will focus on North Korea's military policy. North Korea adopted the policy of developing nuclear weapons in 2013 in accordance with its threat perception that the U.S. policy toward North Korea remains hostile. However, after the declaration of the completion of its nuclear arsenal, North Korea's threat perception to external powers has eased. It is also proved by North Korea's new policy initiatives such as economic

development, adopted even under the incomplete improvement of U.S.-North Korea relations. Not to mention that, since North Korea's threat perception has not been completely weakened, North Korea is still developing a new military policy. Understanding the complex, yet causal relationship between North Korea's security environment and its military policy, this article will focus on North Korea's military policy according to its national security strategy. The issue of North Korea's foreign relations and threat perception is to be left for a separate paper.

2. Nuclear Capabilities

1) Building its Nuclear Deterrent: 2012~2015

Kim Jong-un, who was at the time the first secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), oversaw North Korea's third nuclear test on February 12, 2013. His regime continued to further develop nuclear warheads and acquire nuclear materials after proclaiming the 'policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons (hereafter Byungjin policy)' on March 31. The yield of the third nuclear test conducted in February was estimated to have been 10kt. Compared to how the yield was estimated to have been 1kt for the first nuclear test and 4kt for the second, North Korea had successfully demonstrated the explosiveness of its nuclear detonating devices by the third nuclear test.

Meanwhile, North Korea's nuclear deterrent consists of ICBMs that can strike their American adversaries in addition to nuclear warheads that can be mounted on them. Given this, North Korea required not only sufficiently destructive nuclear warheads but also miniaturized ones as well. Consistent with these needs, the main objectives of the Byungjin policy announced in 2013 were to enhance the power of nuclear weapons through further development of warheads and to increase the size of its nuclear arsenal. The policy also included specific tasks such as improving precision and miniaturization, achieving greater explosiveness, and modernizing North Korea's nuclear industry.¹

After the announcement of the Byungjin policy, North Korea strengthened efforts to produce nuclear materials to achieve these goals. On April 2, 2013, North Korea's General Department of Atomic Energy stated that the graphite-moderated reactor at the Yongbyon nuclear facility would be restarted. The reactors would remain in operation from August 2013 to the end of 2015. Moreover, spent fuel rods produced as a result would be reprocessed in 2016 to produce plutonium needed for the construction of nuclear weapons.² In addition, it was believed that North Korea also produced tritium used for hydrogen bombs during this period because a building thought to be an isotope separation facility was constructed at the Yongbyon nuclear facility in the summer of 2015.³

In the area of missile technology, while the North Korean regime continued to develop long-range missiles under the pretext of satellite launches like the previous Kim Jong-il era, North Korea also began to explicitly state that its goal was to develop ICBMs. On April 14, 2012, North Korea launched its Eunha-3 missile in violation of the 2012 Leap Day Agreement which had placed a moratorium on all missile launches, but the rocket failed to enter into orbit. Despite such failures, North Korea displayed their new type of ICBM, the KN-08, during a military parade commemorating the 100th anniversary of Kim Jong-il's birth a few days later. And on December 12, 2012, North Korea succeeded in placing a rocket into orbit through its second launch of the Eunha-3 missile. There were no additional satellite launches until early 2016, but the North Korean government displayed its modified ICBM, the KN-14, during the military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the WPK.

1 "Report by the Dear Leader Kim Jong-un at the Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee in March 2013 (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 1, 2013.

2 The director of North Korea's Atomic Energy Research Institute stated in a written interview with Kyodo News on August 17, 2016, that "spent fuel rods from graphite-moderated reactors had been reprocessed." Se-won Lee, "North Korea Produces Weapons-grade Plutonium, Planning 5th Nuclear Test (in Korean)," *Yonhap News*, August 17, 2016.

3 Jae Soon Chang, "Probable that North Korea has Produced Tritium, Another Material for the Production of Nuclear Weapons (in Korean)," *Yonhap News*, September 16, 2015.

The nuclear deterrence strategy preferred by North Korea during the early years of the Kim Jong-un regime was to stress the threat of escalation and preemptive strikes. But North Korea's nuclear capabilities were unable to fully support this strategy at the time.⁴ As the U.S.-South Korea alliance strengthened its response to strategic provocations by North Korea conducted between late 2012 and early 2013, North Korea chose to emphasize the threat that it potentially posed, despite lacking the ability to strike with nuclear weapons. For example, North Korea's Strategic Force announced its plan to preemptively strike not only the mainland U.S. but also U.S. military bases in Hawaii and Guam through the *Rodong Sinmun* on March 29, 2013.⁵ But these strategic plans can be viewed as empty threats since North Korea had not yet acquired ICBM technology.

2) Completion of the Nuclear Deterrent: 2016~2017

In 2016 before the 7th party congress of the WPK, North Korea wished to demonstrate its achievements of the Byungjin policy in miniaturizing and improving the explosiveness of its nuclear arsenal. At the time, Kim Jong-un, who was the first secretary of the WPK at the time, announced that a party congress would be held within that year, stating that "this year is a meaningful year during which the 7th party congress of the WPK will be held," in his 2016 new year's address.

Soon thereafter, the fourth nuclear test conducted on January 6 against the protests of China was reported to have a yield of 4kt with an energy release of 4.8 on the Richter scale. North Korea even claimed that a hydrogen bomb had been detonated during the test. Later, on the day of the foundation of the Republic in North Korea on September 9, 2016, the fifth nuclear test recorded an estimated yield of approximately 10kt and with 5.04 reported on the Richter

4 Gregory J. Moore (ed.), *North Korean Nuclear Operationality: Regional Security and Nonproliferation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 15-31.

5 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un convenes an Emergency Strategy Meeting regarding the Fire Strike Mission Operations of the Korean People's Army Strategic Rocket Force, Reviews and Approves Fire Strike Plans (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, March 29, 2013.

scale. This last test was understood to be of a nuclear warhead miniaturized enough to be mounted on to a missile; North Korea confirmed that the test was of "a standardized and miniaturized warhead that can be mounted onto strategic ballistic missiles."⁶ Some believed that the fifth nuclear test had detonated a standardized warhead revealed during Kim Jong-un's previous visit to the Nuclear Scientific Research Center in March 2016.

Meanwhile, the sixth nuclear test conducted about a year later had a yield of more than 50kt and recorded 5.7 on the Richter scale. This last nuclear test appears to have tested a nuclear warhead that had been developed based on the goal of greater explosiveness emphasized in the Byungjin policy. While there are some disputes over whether the nuclear warhead tested during the sixth nuclear test was a boosted fission bomb or a hydrogen bomb,⁷ there is nevertheless a consensus that North Korea had succeeded in increasing the explosiveness of its nuclear arsenal.

As for missiles, North Korea developed mid-range missiles that exhibited greater accuracy from 2016 to 2017, and displayed their progress in the development of ICBMs through consecutive missile test launches. The Byungjin policy had stated acquiring the ability to conduct precision nuclear strikes as the main goal for its nuclear delivery systems. Similar to its nuclear advancements, North Korea advertised its accomplishments in the field of missile development through numerous test launches from 2016. Progress in the development of its traditional Musudan missile program appeared lacking since only one of the six test launches of the missile in 2016 succeeded. But North Korea's new ballistic missiles that were revealed in the fall of 2016 were successfully test-launched with a high-degree of accuracy. The Scud-ER missile, which was initially tested on September 5 through three simultaneous launches, would later record a high-level of accuracy when it landed within

6 "Statement by the Nuclear Scientific Research Center of the DPRK (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, September 9, 2016.

7 Ken Gaus predicted that the warhead used in North Korea's 6th nuclear test is likely to have been a hydrogen bomb. Seung-woo Lee, "U.S. Experts Weigh the Possibility of North Korea Succeeding in Nuclear Fusion, View Sanctions Alone as Insufficient (in Korean)," *Yonhap News*, September 4, 2017.

7 meters of its intended target during a subsequent test in May 2017. Meanwhile, the Pukguksong-2 missile, initially test-launched in February 2016, was a weapons system that had course correction capabilities upon reentry into the atmosphere for precision guidance and interception evasion.⁸ And the North Korean government stressed that its test launch of the Hwasong-12 missile in May 2017 had also managed to land in the intended waters.

Improvements to North Korea's ICBM technology were also displayed during this period. Following Kim Jong-un's mentions that the country's development of ICBMs was entering the final stages in his 2017 new year's speech, four new types of ICBMs including the KN-08 missile and its modified model, as well as cylinder launch tubes mounted on 7-axes and 8-axes transporter erector launchers (TELS) were revealed during the military parade commemorating the Day of the Sun in mid-April a few months later. The Hwasong-14 missile, which is believed to have a range of more than 10,000 km, was test-launched twice in July 2017. North Korea claims that Hwasong-14 missiles, which are ICBMs, are also highly accurate. North Korea then test-launched the Hwasong-15 missile right before declaring the completion of its nuclear arsenal. The Hwasong-15 missile is presumed to have a maximum range of 13,000 km.⁹ While outside observers think that North Korea's ICBMs do not yet possess reentry capabilities, North Korea has claimed that they do on occasions, such as the first test launch of the Hwasong-14 missile.¹⁰

8 Kwi-geun Kim, "North Korea Begins Massive Deployment of Pukguksong-2 Missiles, can Threaten U.S. Reinforcements in Wartime (in Korean)," *Yonhap News*, May 22, 2017.

9 CSIS, "Hwasong-15 (KN-22)," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Missile Defense Project, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/hwasong-15-kg-22/>.

10 "The Glorious Victory of Juche Joseon in the Anti-imperial, Anti-U.S. Struggle -Successful Test Launch of the Hwasong-14 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, July 5, 2017.

(Table1) North Korean Missile Launches after the 7th Party Congress of the WPK, before the Declaration of the Completion of Its Nuclear Arsenal (2016~2017)

Classification		Q3 2016	Q4 2016	Q1 2017	Q2 2017	Q3 2017	Q4 2017
ICBM class	Hwasung-15						Nov, 29
	Hwasung-14					Jul, 4 Jul, 28	
IRBM	Hwasung-12				(Apr, 5) (Apr, 16) (Apr, 29) May, 14	Aug, 29 Sep, 15	
MRBM	Pukguksong-2			Feb, 12	May, 21		
	Scud-ER	Sep, 5		Mar, 6	May, 29		

Note: The date in the table refers to the date when test launches occurred.

From 2016 to 2017, North Korea appeared to have adopted a strategy of asymmetric escalation similar to its strategy in 2013 by emphasizing the threat of a preemptive strike. This appears to be a transitional strategy adopted to respond to the heightened level of military tension caused by North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. From early 2016, Kim Jong-un ordered the entire North Korean military to change its manual for responding to South Korea's decapitation strategy to "a preemptive strike method," and North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also argued that the nation had the right to preemptive nuclear strikes.¹¹ To this end, North Korea designated potential targets for a preemptive strike. North Korea marked the Blue House as a primary target through a major statement from the North Korean Supreme Command of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in February 2016, and further announced that other targets such as South Korean military bases, U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) installations, and U.S. bases on Hawaii and Guam were also potential targets through an announcement by the General Staff of the KPA.¹²

11 "Statement by the Spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 2013.

12 "Spokesperson for the General Staff of the Korean People's Army—The Indiscriminate War Frenzy of the U.S. against the Republic will only bring the Tragic Collapse of the American Empire (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 9, 2017.

3) Increasing Credibility of the Nuclear Deterrent: 2018~2021

There have been no additional nuclear tests since 2018 after North Korea asserted that it has achieved nuclear deterrence. At the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the WPK held in April 2018, Kim Jong-un stated that North Korea would now cease testing nuclear weapons and ICBMs in order to focus all of the country's efforts on developing the economy, considering how the state had achieved nuclear deterrence through the development of nuclear weapons and ICBMs. And to clearly demonstrate its intent to discontinue nuclear tests, North Korea demolished the Punggye-ri nuclear test site in front of reporters from various countries on May 24, 2018. As of this writing, North Korea has not conducted any nuclear tests since then. However, North Korea has not yet ceased the production of nuclear materials. North Korea's secret uranium enrichment facility became an issue at the Hanoi summit between the U.S. and North Korea held in February 2019. Dr. Hecker, who has long analyzed North Korea's nuclear program, estimates that North Korea may be in possession of twenty to sixty nuclear warheads based on the amount of nuclear fission material it has stockpiled.¹³

North Korea's development of its missiles since 2018 has also been pursued with the purpose of strengthening the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. The moratorium on test-launching ICBMs has been maintained in the spirit of the decisions made at the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the WPK held in 2018. But the models of missiles displayed during military parades clearly demonstrate the intent in which North Korea has developed ICBMs. For example, the Hwasong-16 missile revealed during the military parade commemorating the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the WPK in October 2020 had the appearance of a multi-warhead missile. Multi-warhead capabilities are necessary to penetrate America's missile defense system and are thus considered an essential component for a credible retaliatory strike

13 "Estimating North Korea's Nuclear Stockpiles: An Interview With Siegfried Hecker," *38 North*, April 30, 2021, accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/04/estimating-north-koreas-nuclear-stockpiles-an-interview-with-siegfried-hecker/>.

or second-strike capability.

Moreover, a credible nuclear threat requires the ability to survive an attack from an adversary, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) can contribute to this end. Regarding strategic weapons systems, North Korea has actively tried to further advance SLBMs since 2018. Not only were the Pukguksong-4 and Pukguksong-5 SLBMs displayed at the military parades held in October 2020 and January 2021, but North Korea also revealed its new submarines that can load two to three SLBMs in July 2019. North Korea also test-launched the Pukguksong-3 missile in October later that year, and tested its mini-SLBM in October 2021.

With the start of negotiations on denuclearization, Kim Jong-un reaffirmed his commitment to the principle of non-first use. And while the regime's claim that it intends to use nuclear weapons for retaliation only has been diluted amidst the stalemate in negotiations since 2020, it is equally unlikely that North Korea has abandoned its assured retaliation strategy either. During the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the WPK Central Committee, Kim Jong-un stressed that North Korea "would never use nuclear weapons as long as there are no nuclear threats or provocations against our nation." This was a reassertion of the principle of non-first use that Kim Jong-un had previously declared at the 7th party congress of the WPK in 2016. But there were signs that the regime's position on non-first use might be wavering during the 8th party congress of the WPK held in January 2021. At the time, Kim Jong-un mentioned not only retaliatory but potentially preemptive use of nuclear weapons by stating the "advancement of preemptive and retaliatory strike capabilities." Nevertheless, North Korea's position does not appear to be emphasizing preemptive use when compared to its stance from 2013 and 2016. Put differently, North Korea has not threatened nuclear attacks against the U.S. or South Korea through mentions of a possible preemptive nuclear strike since 2018. Moreover, Kim Jong-un highlighted the retaliatory function of nuclear weapons by referring to the arsenal as the "nuclear shield" at the 8th party congress.¹⁴

14 "The Great Doctrine of Struggle Leading the Construction of North Korean-style Socialism to Victory—On the Report by the Dear Leader Kim Jong-un at the

But as the deadline for negotiations on denuclearization has passed since 2020, the North Korean leadership appears to have contemplated the active use of its nuclear deterrent in order to deter potential military threats. These considerations were made visible in May 2020. At the 4th expanded meeting of the Central Military Commission of the 7th term of the WPK, Kim Jong-un ordered plans for utilizing North Korea's nuclear deterrent under "extreme readiness," and seemed to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons through his speech on the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the WPK in October 2020. During this latter occasion, Kim Jong-un stated that while North Korea would never misuse or use preemptive nuclear weapons, it would "punish any actor that either harms the security of the country or tries to use military force against the nation with the preemptive and total use of the most powerful weapon at our disposal."¹⁵

This definition of nuclear retaliation as possibly a preemptive and firm response against foreign threats demonstrates that the North Korean regime thinks that it needs to deter other forms of military risks that do not rise to the level of typical nuclear crises. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un revealed at the 8th party congress in January 2021 that advanced tactical nuclear weapons had been developed. This can be viewed as an attempt to leverage its nuclear capability against relatively low-level threats that do not directly threaten the survival of North Korea, and to also utilize North Korea's nuclear capabilities in response to low-level crises.

8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 9, 2021.

15 "Full Text: Statement by Kim Jong-un at the Military Parade Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Workers' Party of Korea (in Korean)," *Yonhap News*, October 10, 2020.

3. Conventional Capabilities

1) Major Policies to Strengthen the Military and Expansion of Troops: 2012~2015

In the process of pursuing the Byungjin policy, North Korea sought ways to not only develop its nuclear weapons but to also strengthen its conventional military capabilities. As such, the four major policies to strengthen the military began to be prepared on April 27, 2014, at the expanded meeting of North Korea's Party Central Military Commission, about a year after the Byungjin policy was announced. Reports that Kim Jong-un mentioned "important projects and methods to further strengthen the people's military," appears to have been in reference to the four major policies that were later revealed.¹⁶ These policies that were mentioned in passing were later clarified in Kim Jong-un's 2015 new year's speech when he announced the "four major strategic policies and three major projects to strengthen military capabilities." The substance of the four major policies were proposed through Kim Jong-un's speech that he gave while attending the anti-aircraft gun firing competition in June 2015.¹⁷ The policies included strengthening the military through political ideology, strengthening the military through morality, strengthening the military through tactical efficiency, and strengthening the military through diversification of military specialties. The concentration of joint military exercises by the KPA from 2014 to 2015 can be understood as the implementation of the latter two policies.

During the early years of the Kim Jong-un regime from the early- to mid-2010s, there has been a quantitative increase in the number of troops and military equipment without a North Korean-style military reform, even though the need to restructure the military was mentioned.¹⁸ For example, there were claims that the organizational system and the command structure of the North

16 Dong Yub Kim, "North Korean Military Changes under Kim Jong-un's Regime (in Korean)," *Economy and Society* 129, no. 2 (2019): 165.

17 "Supreme Commander Attends the Anti-Aircraft Gun Firing Competition (in Korean)," *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, June 18, 2015.

18 The sections below describe changes to North Korean troops and military equipment based on the contents of South Korea's National Defense White Paper published from 2010 to 2020.

Korean military needed to be revised expressed at the expanded meeting of the Party Central Military Commission held in February 2015, at a time when the four major policies to strengthen the military began to emerge. But during these early stages of the Kim Jong-un regime, the principle of maintaining a large military was sustained, and the size of the army and the air force increased. As of late 2016, the army increased in number by about 80,000 compared to 2012, while the size of the air force also increased by approximately 10,000 troops. As a result, the size of the North Korean military increased from 1.19 million troops in 2012 to 1.29 million in late 2016. After Kim Jong-un purged his uncle and former director of the Administration Department of the WPK, Jang Song-thaek, North Korea established the 12th corps in Yanggang-do in the North Korea-China border region in 2014-2015. This showed that the Kim Jong-un regime was sensitive to the potential possibility of China intervening in internal political struggles.

Meanwhile, the number of military equipment also grew with the increase in the army's number of tanks and armored vehicles. While it was initially anticipated that North Korea would have approximately 4,100 tanks in 2010, the actual number in 2014 was 4,300. Estimates of the number of armored vehicles also increased by about 400 vehicles, from 2,100 in 2010 to 2,500 in 2014. At the same time, it appears that the number of North Korea's rocket artillery systems also increased mostly at military bases on North Korea's Western Coast. The number of North Korea's multiple launch and rocket artillery systems increased by 700 units, from 4,800 in 2012 to 5,500 in 2014, as seen in Table 2 below.

Furthermore, the Kim Jong-un regime also determined the direction of its weapons development program for the modernization of its conventional capabilities. Since proclaiming the Byungjin policy in 2013, the regime proposed "precision, lightweight, and smart" as the goals of advancing its conventional capabilities. These objectives were stated during Kim Jong-un's speech at the 53rd anniversary of the Day of Sungun on August 25, 2014, and achievements in weapons development based on these goals were later connected to 'Juche weapons.'

2) Military Policy Transition: 2016~2017

At around the time of the 7th party congress of the WPK, North Korea's military policy became much more subordinate to the higher national strategy of regime stability and economic development. It also appeared to promote the formation of an elite fighting force as the primary objective, replacing the traditional principle of maintaining a large military. In his 2016 new year's speech, Kim Jong-un unambiguously referred to the military policy that had been promoted since the beginning of his regime as the "four major policies of strengthening the military." He did so by mentioning in his speech on January 1, 2016 that "a transition to the four major policies to strengthen the military" must be achieved during the year which marked the 20th year of the "movement to compete for the title of Oh Jung-heup 7th Regiment military." Among the four major policies, strengthening the military through political ideology and strengthening the military through morality emphasized how the military must be loyal to the party and to the people. Meanwhile, strengthening the military through tactical efficiency and strengthening the military through diversification of military specialties demanded the elitism and modernization of the military.

Within this context, what was especially noteworthy was the formation of the North Korean State Affairs Commission which would replace the role of the existing National Defense Commission. During the 4th meeting of the 13rd term of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly held after the 7th party congress, Kim Jong-un revised the constitution through which he made the State Affairs Commission the highest leadership organization in the nation, replacing the role traditionally assumed by the National Defense Commission. The revised constitution states that the State Affairs Commission is also in charge of national defense policy as an important aspect of state policy. By clearly defining how national defense policy is subject to the overall national policy, the Kim Jong-un regime declared both home and abroad that it was trying to move away from the military-first Sungun politics of the past. Moreover, new year's statements in 2016 and 2017 both commonly stressed that there would be a trend of fierce training by the North Korean military forces, which illustrated the desire to make the KPA an elite fighting force.

In terms of the North Korean military's troops and equipment, the North Korean government during this period reorganized the military unit structure as the nuclear arsenal was nearing completion. Moreover, the increase in the size of North Korea's conventional capabilities slowed as resources were mostly allocated to nuclear and missile tests. North Korea further indicated that it would focus on restructuring the structure of its conventional military corps once it had secured the nuclear deterrent, a task that the regime had failed to address up till this point. As a matter of fact, there were changes to the unit structure of the North Korean military as the role of brigades were strengthened within the KPA. While there were 74 independent brigades in late 2016, the number increased substantially to 131 by late 2018. In contrast, the size of conventional capabilities only increased slowly. Though there were efforts to replace outdated equipment through decisions such as the deployment of the relatively new Sungun tanks, North Korea's conventional capabilities do not appear to have increased much in terms of its size. During the period from 2014 to 2018, the size of North Korea's conventional capabilities remained unchanged in almost every aspect, including tanks, armored vehicles, field guns, and rocket artillery systems.

Similar to how Kim Jong-un demonstrated advancements in the development of nuclear weapons and missiles through tests, the conventional weaponry that had been developed up till this period was also proudly displayed. In February and March of 2016, Kim Jong-un referred to anti-tank guided weapons and new large-caliber rocket launchers that North Korea had recently test-fired as "Juche weapons." The term referred to the weapons systems that North Korea had independently developed with its own science and technology for national defense. Even though nuclear weapons were at the center of North Korea's efforts to strengthen the military from 2016 to 2017, test-firing of conventional weaponry was also conducted. Kim Jong-un observed the test-firing of the Pongae-5 surface-to-air missile twice from 2016 to 2017, and he also approved the mass production of the Pongae-5 missiles during his visit in May 2017. The Kumsong-3 surface-to-ship missile was also test-fired in June 2017.

〈Table 2〉 Size of North Korea's Main Conventional Capabilities (2010–2020)

Classification			2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	
Number of Troops (10,000)	Army		102	102	102	110	110	110	
	Navy		6	6	6	6	6	6	
	Air Force		11	11	12	11	11	11	
	Strategic Forces					1	1	1	
	Total		119	119	120	128	128	128	
Equipment	Army	Unit	Corps	15	15	15	17	17	15
			Divisions	90	88	81	82	81	84
			Independent Brigades	70	72	74	74	131	117
		Equipment	Tanks	4,100	4,200	4,300	4,300	4,300	4,300
			Armored Vehicles	2,100	2,200	2,500	2,500	2,500	2,600
			Field Guns	8,500	8,600	8,600	8,600	8,600	8,800
			MRLs/RL	5,100	4,800	5,500	5,500	5,500	5,500
	Navy	Surface Ships	Combat Ships	420	420	430	430	430	430
			Landing Ships	260	260	260	250	250	250
		Submarines	Submarines	70	70	70	70	70	70
	Air Force	Equipment	Combat Aircraft	820	820	820	810	810	810
			Non-Combat Aircraft	330	330	330	330	340	350
			Jet Trainers	170	170	170	170	170	80
Army, Navy, Air Force		Helicopters	300	300	300	290	290	290	

Note: The table was compiled using data from the appendixes from South Korea's National Defense White Paper. The date for each count is December of each year.

3) Modern Defense Strategy and the Modernization of Weapons Systems: 2018~2021

Since the completion of its nuclear arsenal, the Kim Jong-un regime called on the military to support economic development in 2018 as negotiations over denuclearization with the U.S. had resumed. At around April 2018 when Kim Jong-un adopted the policy of all-out concentration on developing the economy, North Korea's Minister of the People's Armed Forces was already attending meetings on economic development.¹⁹ Likewise, the director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA accompanied Kim Jong-un to the construction site at the Kalma district in Wonsan. These high-ranking officials of the North Korean military had all been appointed after the policy of all-out concentration on developing the economy had been adopted, and these instances conveyed the message that North Korea's military strategy would be subject to the overall national policy.²⁰

But since its declaration of the strategy of engaging in a head-on breakthrough battle in 2020, North Korea has presented a national defense strategy in accordance with modern warfare and its nature of limited battles focused on precision strikes to respond to pressure exerted by the U.S. In particular, at a test-firing of new tactical weapons systems in March 2020, Kim Jong-un stated that "North Korea must firmly prepare the ability to strike adversaries outside our borders to repel impudent aggression against our nation," claiming that this was the national defense strategy of the WPK.²¹ And this notion was repeated in Kim Jong-un's statements at the 8th party congress of the WPK held in January 2021 when he claimed that "our national defense

19 "Joint Meeting of the Party, Government, Economy, and Military Officials to Perfectly Promote the New Strategic Policy Proposed at the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Term of the Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 1, 2018.

20 Involvement of the military was also requested in China during the period of reform and openness. See, Gerald Segal and Richard H. Yang. *Chinese Economic Reform: The Impact on Security* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 11-34.

21 "Dear Leader Kim Jong-un Demonstrates use of Tactical Guidance Weapons (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, March 22, 2020.

capabilities have improved to a level that can overpower threats from our adversaries preemptively outside our territory." These comments reflect recognition of the concept of modern warfare to defend industrial and population centers by defeating military threats outside the territory. It further indicates that the North Korean military is moving away from its people's war doctrine which calls for the defeat of enemy forces alongside an armed population after luring the enemy onto one's territory.²²

In terms of troop numbers and equipment, North Korea has demonstrated its intent to reduce the size or reform its military since declaring the completion of its nuclear arsenal. Based on the organization of the North Korean military, South Korea's National Defense White Paper estimates the troop size of the North Korean military to be 1.28 million. But the length of service in the North Korean military reverted to ten years in 2016 as a result of the decision on military discharge by the Ministry of People's Armed Forces. There was also an announcement in early 2021 by South Korea's intelligence agencies that the military service period in North Korea had been reduced by two years. Based on these facts, the actual number of troops in the North Korean military is estimated to decrease by 150,000 troops due to the two-year reduction in military service alone.²³ In the context of transforming into an elite force, the North Korean military is expected to use the reduction in the number of troops as an opportunity for national defense reform. Meanwhile, increases to the size of North Korea's conventional capabilities have been marginal since 2018.²⁴

22 "Dear Leader Kim Jong-un Demonstrates use of Tactical Guidance Weapons (in Korean)," *Rodong Sinmun*, March 22, 2020.

23 The following article may be referenced to accurately estimate the degree of reduction of North Korean troops; Sung Han Tak, "The Actual Size of the North Korean Military: Estimations and Forecasts," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 30, no. 3 (2018): 323-327.

24 In particular, investment in field guns, tanks, and armored vehicles is unlikely to be a wise strategy because these weapons systems are limited in responding to the combined capabilities of the U.S. and South Korea. See, Nam-hoon Cho, "The Accomplishments and Outlook for North Korea's Arms Industry in the Context of Denuclearization and the Policy of All-out Concentration on Developing the Economy (in Korean)," *KDI Review of the North Korean Economy* 21, no. 2 (2019): 83.

According to South Korea's National Defense White Paper, the only changes observed have been an increase of 100 and 200 armored vehicles and field guns, respectively.²⁵

The North Korean military has instead focused on the development of new rocket launch systems and other tactical weapons to support the national defense strategy for modern warfare and offset the impact of a smaller troop military. For example, the North Korean military has intensively test-fired North Korean-style 9K720 Iskander missiles, North Korean-style MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), large-caliber 19-5 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), and its new large-caliber controlled rocket launcher, weaponry commonly referred to as the four new types of North Korean tactical weapons systems, until the first half of 2020. In addition, the modified KN-23 SRBMs have continued to be test-fired in 2021. Next, North Korea test-launched its long-range cruise missile, rail-mobile ballistic missile, hypersonic missile, and mini-SLBMs in 2021.²⁶ These launches were intended to realize the military strategy and weapon development policy announced at the 8th party congress. The long-range missile tested on September 11-12 was referred to by Kim Jong-un during the 8th party congress as an example of the highly-advanced tactical weapons that North Korea had already developed. The test launch of the rail-mobile ballistic missile on September 15 was also based on the regime's position stated at the 8th party congress. Lastly, the hypersonic missile and the new mini-SLBMs each test-launched on September 28 and October 19, respectively, were also mentioned during the 8th party congress as ongoing weapons system development projects that needed to be prioritized. As Kim Jong-un had previously stated at the 8th party congress to "radically upgrade the military from a conventional force structure to a modern and elite military," North Korea

25 North Korea exhibited the view through the Byungjin policy that it could afford to invest in non-military areas once it achieved nuclear deterrence. Dong Yub Kim, "North Korea's Dual Policy of Nuclear and Economic Development and Military Changes (in Korean)," *Review of North Korean Studies* 18, no. 2 (2015): 92-93.

26 This new SLBM is considered to be a modified version of the KN-23 missile.

is transforming its conventional military into an elite fighting force and arming it with advanced weaponry through its five-year plan for the development of science for national defense.²⁷

4. Conclusion

As discussed above, the structure and policy of the North Korean military have changed over the past ten years since the Kim Jong-un regime began in late 2011. Above all, the North Korean government has transformed its nuclear weapons from a political tool into a military weapons system. The Kim Jong-un regime pursued the development of nuclear warheads and missiles from 2012 to 2015 in accordance with its Byungjin policy, and conducted consecutive nuclear and missile tests from 2016 to 2017 as it sought to demonstrate the accomplishments of the policy. Since late 2017 when the regime declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal, North Korea has focused on enhancing the credibility of its nuclear deterrent.

As for conventional capabilities, the Kim Jong-un regime has tried to move away from the traditional principle of maintaining a large military, instead opting to reduce unnecessary manpower while also selectively modernizing its weapons systems. In the early stages of the Kim Jong-un regime when it lacked confidence in nuclear deterrence, North Korea was unable to implement reforms designed to improve the quality of its conventional forces and instead chose to increase the size of its military due to fear of potential foreign military intervention. In contrast, North Korea's restructuring of its outsized military began in earnest in 2018 once it declared its status as a nuclear state. Not only has it shown interest in modern warfare centered around artillery battles,²⁸

27 Here, the formation of a modern and elite military force is likely to refer to the restructuring of the military force equipped with a high-powered mechanized weapons system, rather than one reliant on manpower. Donald M. Snow and Dennis M. Drew, *Making Strategy: An Introduction to National Security Process and Problems* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of the Pacific, 2002), 85-87.

28 "The 4th Artillery Competition of the Korean People's Army Successfully held under the Guidance of the Dear Leader Kim Jong-un (in Korean)," *Rodong*

North Korea has also changed its national defense strategy in 2020 to preemptively eliminate military threats outside its territory. North Korea's advanced conventional weapons systems reflect this fundamental shift in war-fighting strategy.

Based on the findings of this article, the following implications may be suggested regarding North Korea's nuclear arsenal on the one hand, and the relationship between nuclear and conventional capabilities on the other. First, North Korea's nuclear deterrence strategy can be explained with its economic situation, security environment, and nuclear capabilities, which means that it may change in the future as each of these factors fluctuate. North Korea is likely to prefer the retaliatory strike strategy as a way to most effectively enjoy the benefits of acquiring nuclear weapons. But in order to depend on this strategy, North Korea needs to improve its security environment through measures such as enhancing bilateral relations with the U.S. In contrast, North Korea will become increasingly reliant on its nuclear capabilities given its relative weakness in conventional capabilities if the situation does not improve. It therefore appears that North Korea is developing tactical nuclear weapons in order to utilize its nuclear deterrent on low-level crises that are difficult to issue strategic nuclear threats against.²⁹ Successful acquisition of tactical nuclear capabilities will further expand the applicability of North Korea's nuclear deterrence strategy.

Lastly, in declaring its Byungjin policy, Kim Jong-un claimed that the development of nuclear weapons would reduce the costs of maintaining its conventional capabilities; an argument that many experts expressed doubts at the time. So far, while North Korea has attempted to reduce the costs of sustaining its conventional forces since the completion of its nuclear arsenal, it has failed to scale down the costs of improving the quality of the military

Sinmun, December 5, 2015.

²⁹ Kim argues that North Korea's strategic thinking can be understood by reviewing the case of Pakistan's strategic nuclear planning. Tae-hyun Kim, "Nuclear Armed State's Military Strategy and Force Planning: Pakistan and Its Implication to North Korea (in Korean)," *Journal of Military History* 108 (2018): 56-58.

due to the development of advanced weapons systems and the production of new weaponry. As a matter of fact, it is likely that the costs of developing advanced weapons have increased since the failed U.S.-North Korea Hanoi summit in 2019. But this is the consequence of the stalemate in bilateral negotiations on denuclearization. The security environment must improve for the nuclear substitution effect of saving the defense budgets to occur that North Korea desires.³⁰

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30 See, Ahsan I. Butt, "Do Nuclear Weapons Affect the Guns-Butter Trade-off? Evidence on Nuclear Substitution from Pakistan and Beyond," *Conflict, Security & Development* 15, no. 3 (2015): 229-257.

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An Assessment of the Past 10 Years of South Korea Policy of the Kim Jong-un Regime

Gee-Dong Lee*

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate South Korea's policy on North Korea over the past ten years under the Kim Jong-un regime. It is necessary to assess the regime's policies towards South Korea in connection with North Korea's national policy and security strategy as they are methods of achieving statewide and security-related objectives while addressing potential challenges. During the early phases of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea chose the Byungjin policy of simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons. But in reality, North Korea's security strategy during this period was to focus on acquiring nuclear weapons. Given this, policies regarding South Korea were oriented towards cultivating an advantageous environment for, and managing obstacles against, the development of nuclear weapons. And as a result, North Korea's South Korea policy oscillated between aggressive and conciliatory approaches.

Meanwhile, North Korea changed its national policy to a policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy in April 2018. The regime has subsequently revised its security strategy in 4 different ways to pursue the new national strategy and adapt to the changing environment, and North Korea's South Korea policy during this latter phase has reflected such intentions. Specifically, North Korea adopted a conciliatory policy when it sought to foster favorable external conditions for economic development, while transitioning to a more aggressive stance based on the concept of prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea when opting for an isolationist breakthrough battle to grow its economy. North Korea later tried to conditionally improve inter-Korean relations when it attempted to preserve a peaceful environment, and proposed preconditions while displaying a conciliatory attitude when it tried to cultivate a more advantageous environment. As this illustrates, North Korea's South Korea policy has been subjected to, and has been used as

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a tool for, the state's national and security policy as determined by the situation and the changing environment. Consequently, the Kim Jong-un regime's policies on South Korea have been varied and makeshift, rather than being principled.

Keywords: South Korea policy, national strategy, security strategy, Byungjin, Kim Jong-un regime

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to assess South Korea's policy on North Korea over the past ten years. But in order to do so, it is first necessary to understand the national strategy of North Korea as it not only includes, but also impacts, various aspects of state policy, including South Korea policy. North Korea's national strategy particularly emphasizes the economy and national security. This feature is not unique to the Kim Jong-un regime but is closer to a tradition in North Korea. The Kim Il-sung regime pursued the Byungjin policy of the economy and national security, while the Kim Jong-il regime emphasized military policy. The Kim Jong-un regime began with the Byungjin policy of developing the economy as well as completing its nuclear arsenal, then changed it to focus on economic policy. In addition, the Kim Jong-un regime has subjected South Korea policy to the achievement of goals promoted by its national strategy. In particular, the South Korea policy of North Korea has been used as a tool to foster favorable conditions for national policy and manage challenges.¹ Based on these observations, this article will first examine North Korea's national strategy by broadly distinguishing between the initial Byungjin policy of developing the economy and completing its nuclear arsenal and the subsequent policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy.

Next, the article analyzes the security strategies that have been pursued by North Korea in order to achieve its national strategy. Using this framework reveals how the security strategy of all-out concentration on completing the nuclear arsenal was pursued during the Byungjin policy phase of the Kim Jong-un regime. Meanwhile, its security strategy changed during the period in which North Korea pursued its policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy in the following order: cultivating

1 Park (2021) also assessed North Korea's South Korea policy from a similar perspective. Hyeong Jung Park, "10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime – On South Korea Policy (in Korean)," *proceedings for the academic conference co-hosted by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) and the Future Convergence Research Institute*, Changwon University (2021), p. 19.

a favorable external environment, engaging in an isolationist breakthrough battle, preserving a peaceful environment, and fostering an advantageous environment. Based on this classification, the article then describes how South Korea policy has been related to each of these changes to North Korea's security strategy. During the phase of all-out concentration on the development of nuclear weapons, North Korea adopted a dual strategy of both aggressive and conciliatory attitudes vis-à-vis South Korea. North Korea subsequently adopted a conciliatory policy when it sought to foster favorable external conditions for economic development, while transitioning to a more aggressive stance based on the concept of prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea when opting for an isolationist breakthrough battle to grow its economy. Furthermore, North Korea adopted the principle of conditionally improving inter-Korean relations when it attempted to preserve a peaceful environment, and has proposed preconditions while displaying a conciliatory attitude as it tries to cultivate a more advantageous environment. This article seeks to analyze the Kim Jong-un regime's official statements and actions towards South Korea over the past 10 years chronologically using this framework.

II. The Byungjin Policy of Simultaneous Economic Growth and Development of Nuclear Power and South Korea Policy

1. The Situation Early in the Kim Jong-un Regime and the Byungjin Policy of Simultaneous Economic Growth and Development of Nuclear Power.

The sudden death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011 left complete development of nuclear weapons as a dying wish for Kim Jong-un and a path-dependent restriction on his governance. Kim Jong-il appears to have planned to announce the completion of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and the nation's "entry into the club of strong countries" in 2012 which marked the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth. Based on this foundation, the task of achieving economic development which would enable North Korea to "capture the highest rank among strong countries"

would be passed on to his successor Kim Jong-un. But the untimely death of Kim Jong-il meant that Kim Jong-un would inherit an incomplete project as his own. Such path dependence was inevitable and not a matter of choice. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un also needed to quickly stabilize his power and secure the legitimacy of his rule. The trajectory of history alone was insufficient in addressing these needs, which meant that Kim Jong-un needed to demonstrate his own style of leadership that differed from his predecessors. To this end, Kim Jong-un proclaimed that his own path forward would be the 'path of socialism' by announcing the theses of "the path of Juche, Sungun, and socialism" in 2013.

The issues of path dependence created by hereditary succession were solved through the paths of Juche and Songun as Kim il-sung-ism/Kim Jong-il-ism was established as the guiding ideology during the 4th meeting of representatives of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in 2012. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un made the people-first principle the official objective of the path of socialism by personally stating in 2014 that the "essence of Kim il-sung-ism/Kim Jong-il-ism is the people-first principle." Through these steps, the direction decided by the new regime became the people-first principle. And through a combination of these competing pressures, the Byungjin policy of simultaneous economic growth and development of nuclear weapons was declared at a plenary meeting of the WPK in March 2013. Economic development reflected the new direction proposed by the Kim Jong-un regime while nuclear weapons were the result of path dependence.

The security-related contents and implications of the Byungjin policy were as follows. First, completion of the nuclear arsenal was defined as a necessary condition both at home and abroad for the growth of the economy and the betterment of living conditions.² North Korea emphasized how the

2 "The struggle to develop the economy and improve the lives of the people can successfully proceed only when it is guaranteed with strong military power and a nuclear arsenal," statements by Kim Jong-un at a Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee of the WPK, March 31, 2013.

reduction in military spending could be reallocated to improving everyday lives, as well as how advancements in the atomic energy sector would be used to resolve the nation's energy problems. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un also stated during the plenary meeting in March that "the Byungjin policy is superior because it allows to focus on economic development and improving people's lives since it decidedly strengthens the ability to deter and defend without additional increases to military spending." Second, North Korea defined the completion of its nuclear arsenal as a matter of self-defense against sanctions and pressure by the U.S. that obstructed the nation's efforts to improve its economy and the lives of the people. North Korea claimed that "the U.S. and its puppets are forcing us into an arms race in order to cause difficulties in our struggle to construct an economically strong country and improve the lives of the people." The North Korean regime also relied on the theory of nuclear peace and the belief that nuclear states are not invaded. As shown above, Kim Jong-un argued that the development of nuclear weapons was a necessary condition for economic growth.

In this regard, Kim Jong-un ordered the active promotion of an 'advantageous external environment' necessary for the pursuit of the Byungjin policy. North Korea sought to do so by responding to international sanctions and isolation by diversifying its foreign trade relations. Politically, North Korea searched for friendly nations through diplomatic activities as a proud and strong nuclear state, emphasized that it would actively contribute to regional and global peace and security as a responsible nuclear state, and claimed that it would faithfully carry out its duties regarding nonproliferation and assist denuclearization around the world. But it was structurally impossible for such efforts to foster an advantageous external environment to coexist with the Byungjin policy.

In essence, the Byungjin policy was a strategy that focused on cultivating a security environment in which North Korea could devote all its attention to economic development but, in reality, can be regarded as a policy of all-out concentration on the completion of its nuclear arsenal. As a matter of fact, North Korea conducted three of its six nuclear tests

during the period between when the Byungjin policy was announced and November 2017 when the completion of the nuclear program was declared. North Korea also test-launched 60 ballistic missiles from 2014 to 2017; 13 missiles were launched in 2014, two in 2015, 24 in 2016, and 21 missiles tested through 16 launches in 2017.³ It seems that North Korea had intended the Byungjin policy to contribute to the completion of nuclear weapons from the beginning. While economic development comes first in the official title of the Byungjin policy, its implementation clearly prioritizes nuclear weapons. And during the 3rd plenary meeting of the 7th term of the Party Central Committee of the WPK in April 2018, North Korea announced the completion of the Byungjin policy based on its nuclear weapons alone.

Additionally, obtaining and securing the support of the military during the early stages of the Kim Jong-un regime were crucial. The need to quickly stabilize the political uncertainty precipitated by the sudden death of Kim Jong-il required Kim Jong-un to draw the military, a potential 'double-edged sword,' to his power base.⁴ To achieve this immediate goal, Kim Jong-un implemented measures to enhance the Party's control over the military on one hand, while highly valuing the role of the military in the task of 'strengthening independent national security' on the other. For example, the regime purged former Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA) Ri Yong-ho in July 2012, appointed Choe Ryong-hae as director of the KPA General Political Bureau, and transferred foreign currency-earning operations monopolized by the military to the Cabinet to increase the Party's control of the military. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un had to accept structural constraints that prohibited his regime from abandoning the Sungun Revolutionary policy of the past as a political compromise, despite having chosen the 'path of socialism' with its

3 Seong-ryoul Cho, presentation, the General Meeting of the Peace and Development Subcommittee of the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council (PUAC), March 3, 2021. (in Korean)

4 Geedong Lee, "The Party Leadership and Control Over the Military During the Kim Jong-un Period (in Korean)," *INSS Strategy Report* 140 (2021).

emphasis on revitalizing the economy and improving the lives of the people as its overall direction. North Korea also faced policy constraints due to the need to respond aggressively to the 'strategic patience' of the Obama administration and its policy of non-engagement while the U.S. maintained sanctions and pressure.⁵ Simply put, Kim Jong-un strategically adopted the Byungjin policy of economic development and development of nuclear weapons as the Party's policy to consolidate his regime.

2. The Policy of All-out Concentration on Development of Nuclear Power and Dual-sided Policy towards South Korea

The South Korea policy on North Korea during the initial period of the Byungjin policy, simultaneously developing the economy and nuclear weapons, was subjugated to the all-out concentration on the development of nuclear weapons and was used as a tool to achieve this goal. Therefore, North Korea's South Korea policy became dual-sided as it oscillated from aggressive to conciliatory approaches based on the circumstances at hand.

1) Aggressive approach

Immediately after the beginning of the Kim Jong-un regime, North Korea revealed its intent to initiate a 'war of national unification' as soon as possible using its nuclear arsenal and conventional weapons. In response to joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises in February 2012, North Korea declared a 'struggle of all-out war' against South Korea while also mentioning 'fierce retaliatory strikes.' North Korea subsequently launched the 'Kwangmyongsong-3' missile in December 2012 and followed up its third nuclear test conducted in February 2013 by thoroughly

5 "There is now a giant obstacle before our nation that, based on our independent ability to deter war, had intended to concentrate our efforts to economic development in order to ensure that our people no longer need to tighten their belts and enjoy the prosperity of socialism." Statements by Kim Jong-un at a Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee of the WPK in March, *Rodong Sinmun*, March 31, 2013.

heightening military tensions between March and April. Amidst these circumstances, North Korea decided to close down the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Through a statement by the head of the United Front Department Kim Yang-gon, North Korea blamed disrespect to their 'highest dignity' by South Korean officials and the media for the closure, and additionally claimed that the Complex benefitted South Korea more than it did North Korea economically.⁶ It seems that North Korea had no choice but to respond firmly against any actions that appeared to disrespect their 'highest dignity' since it was a period during which the Kim Jong-un regime prioritized the security of the regime more than anything else.

The Dresden speech by President Park Geun-hye on March 28, 2014, caused North Korea to worsen inter-Korean relations even further. The symbolic nature of the location of the speech being in the former East Germany side and President Park's mentioning of malnutrition among pregnant women and children in North Korea and the issue of North Korean defectors provoked North Korea.⁷ Strained inter-Korean relations ensued, with North Korea harshly criticizing President Park and other South Korean officials. This can be interpreted as not only a response to the Park administration's remarks about the regime, but also as an effort to prevent public unrest that might have occurred due to weakening domestic support and the international community's denunciation of the regime as a result of the execution of Kim Jong-un's uncle and former director of the Administration Department of the WPK Jang Song Thaek in December 2013.

6 "The confrontational-frenzied apostles of South Korea have continued to issue statements denigrating our highest dignity by mentioning 'monetary lifelines,' 'detainment,' or 'hostages,' and Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-jin has also revealed his incendiary intent to include U.S. special forces in the issue of the Kaesong Industrial Complex by speaking of 'hostage rescue' operations." "On the Serious Decision Regarding the Situation Involving the Kaesong Industrial Complex (in Korean)," *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*, April 8, 2013.

7 "What is absurd is how the leader of South Korea has feigned concern for our pregnant women and children by erroneously distorting our conditions by speaking of an economic crisis or hunger," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 1, 2014.

The tension between the two Koreas reached its peak following the wooden mine incident in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in August 2015. The Park administration responded by resuming loudspeaker broadcasts. In retaliation, North Korea threatened to target the speakers and conducted artillery strikes against South Korean territory on the western front on August 20. Retaliatory fire by South Korea caused Kim Jong-un to declare a 'quasi-state of war' on the front lines. This episode showed how unplanned military clashes between the two Koreas could occur at any moment and how it might potentially escalate into an all-out war. Above all, it clearly demonstrated how North Korea was particularly sensitive to the resumption of loudspeaker broadcasts. Protecting the 'highest dignity' was a matter of life and death for North Korean forces and an issue that they were willing to risk war over.

North Korea would conduct its fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016, and consequently test-launch the 'Kwangmyongsong-4' missile on February 7. The Park administration decided to withdraw operations from the Kaesong Industrial Complex to which North Korea reacted by closing it completely. After those measures and before North Korea declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal, all openings to possible dialogue between the two Koreas remained closed as North Korea conducted two additional nuclear tests and test-launched several missiles, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

2) Conciliatory Approach

North Korea began to shift to a conciliatory South Korea policy following the visit to China and meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping by the director of the KPA General Political Bureau Choe Ryong-hae in May 2013. It appears that director Choe's visit was pursued by North Korea as its diplomatic isolation deepened and its economic situation worsened with China's active participation in the international sanctions regime. In particular, North Korea demonstrated extreme restraint in not criticizing South Korea during the Ulchi-Freedom Guardian joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises in August 2013. Meanwhile, the visit to North Korea and

meeting with Kim Jong-un by Hyundai Group Chairwoman Hyun Jeong-eun opened the doors to a possible reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Subsequently, a statement by the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland authorized by Kim Jong-un guaranteed the normal operation of the Complex on August 7, and the Complex was reopened on August 14 after the 7th working-level meeting on the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Furthermore, inter-Korean family reunions were held from February 20 to 25, 2014, at Mount Kumgang. This round of family reunions was particularly meaningful as it coincided with U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises. It appears that North Korea was highly hopeful for the resumption of tourism to Mount Kumgang in return for the family reunions. Another noteworthy aspect was the significant role personally played by Kim Jong-un during this process.⁸

North Korea announced its proposal for a federal confederation on July 7, 2014 through a statement issued by the government. The proposal for a federal confederation was derived from common elements in South Korea's concept of confederation that was based on the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration of 2000 on the one hand and North Korea's formula for a loose form of federation on the other. The proposal can be interpreted as North Korea's acceptance of South Korea's proposal for a confederation since the federal confederation system acknowledges a two-state system while the lower-level plan for a federation assumes a one-state system. It appears North Korea proposed this plan for a federal confederation in response to talks of unification through absorption that were discussed under the Park administration at the time.

Later, North Korea would dispatch a high-level delegation that included the new director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA Hwang Pyong-so, along with secretaries of the WPK Choe Ryong-hae and Kim

8 Seong-chang Cheong, "Assessing 10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime's South Korea Policy and Anticipating the Future (in Korean)," *proceedings from the international webinar co-hosted by the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) and Freidrich Haumann Foundation (FHF)*, "North Korea's Past Decade under Kim Jong-un's Rule and What the Future Holds," (2021) pp. 224-225.

Yang-gon, to attend the closing ceremony of the Incheon Asian Games on October 4, 2014. The delegation met with the South Korean National Security Advisor Kim Kwan-jin and agreed to hold a second round of high-level talks during their visit. This meeting failed to occur, however, due to the issue of propaganda leaflets sent from South Korea. This was a clear example of North Korea using inter-Korean relations to establish and consolidate the Kim Jong-un regime. It can be speculated that Kim Jong-un had internal reasons for why it had to use an international sporting event to deliver a conciliatory message, even though it still remains unclear what the regime had sought to achieve by urgently sending three of its most powerful officials to 'enemy territory.'

Tense inter-Korean relations following the wooden mine incident in August 2015 began to transition into a negotiation phase. High-level talks were held at the Peace House in Panmunjom for 3 days from August 22 to 24. In attendance were South Korea's National Security Advisor and Minister of National Unification and North Korea's director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA and head of the United Front Department. Through this meeting, the two sides issued a joint press release that included an early hosting of inter-Korean governmental meetings, an expression of regret by North Korea regarding the wooden mine incident, suspension of loudspeaker broadcasts by South Korea, lifting of the quasi-state of war by North Korea, family reunions at around *Chuseok*, and revitalizing inter-Korean civilian exchanges. Inter-Korean governmental meetings were subsequently held on December 11-12, 2015, at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, but ultimately failed due to North Korea's demands of resuming tourism to Mount Kungang in exchange for the family reunion. Following this meeting, inter-Korean relations remained frozen until North Korea's participation in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

III. Policy of All-out Concentration on Growing the Economy and South Korea Policy

1. Completion of Nuclear Development, Conclusion of the Byungjin Policy, and the Adoption of the Policy of All-out Concentration on Growing the Economy

North Korea conducted three nuclear tests and countless test launches of various types of ballistic missiles from early 2016 to November 2017. As a result, North Korea faced five UN Security Council resolutions on sanctions targeting the regime, and inter-Korean relations, as well as North Korea's external relations with other countries, became practically non-existent. Regarding North Korea's test launch of the 'Hwasong-15' ballistic missile on November 29, 2017, which later became the foundation for the regime's declaration of the completion of its nuclear arsenal, there were understandable doubts about how it might have been incomplete technology-wise. Doubts remain to this day about how the test launch failed to demonstrate reentry capabilities and precision strike technology, two core technological components of ICBMs, even though North Korea demonstrated that their missiles had the range to strike the U.S. mainland. This is due to how North Korea chose the vertical-angle launch method rather than a normal-angle launch.

And while there are various explanations for the reasons and context in which North Korea prematurely declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal, the general consensus is that the goal was to transition to its policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy after declaring its completion of nuclear development. Key conditions needed to be satisfied for the regime to focus all its efforts on economic development. One was to foster a favorable external environment for economic development by not only suspending the nuclear program but also showing that it had been improved. The other was to secure firm measures for its survival so that there weren't any gaps in the country's national security posture due to denuclearization. These two conditions became the standard on which North Korea's security policy was crafted, and they subsequently led to three distinct phases. First was the period of cultivating a favorable

external environment. This was followed by the period of maintaining a peaceful environment. The last was fostering an advantageous external environment. North Korea maintained its policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy at the 8th Party congress of the WPK, and the success and failure of its new five-year national economic development plan announced at the Party congress became an additional criterion for North Korea's security policy.

2. Policy of All-out Concentration on Growing the Economy and South Korea Policy

1) Fostering a Favorable Environment for Economic Development and Conciliatory South Korea Policy

Soon after Kim Jong-un conveyed a conciliatory message to South Korea and the international community through his 2018 new year's statement, North Korea confirmed its intent to pursue progressive foreign policy in the form of announcing its decision to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and agreeing to the inter-Korean summit meeting on April 27 as well as the U.S.-North Korea summit meeting on June 12. These actions were an extension of the 3rd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee of the 7th term of the WPK held on April 20, 2018, at which both the 'victory of the Byungjin policy' based on the completion of the 'weaponization of nuclear weapons' had been declared and the policy of all-out concentration on developing the economy announced. The security-related strategic implications of the decisions made at this particular meeting were as follows. First, among the three written- decisions adopted at the meeting, the one titled, "Regarding the Declaration of the Great Victory of the Byungjin Policy of Simultaneously Developing the Economy and Nuclear Weapons" included 6 decisions.⁹

9 ■ Completed weaponization of nuclear weapons through nuclear tests, miniaturization, light weight, and the development of delivery systems for nuclear warheads, ■ Suspend nuclear tests and test-launches of ICBMs after April 21, 2018 and dismantle the nuclear testing site in the northern region, ■ Suspend nuclear tests as part of the global nuclear disarmament process, ■ Non-use

Meanwhile, the second written-decision titled "To Concentrate All-out Efforts to Build a Socialist Economy that Meets the Demands of a Higher Stage of Revolutionary Progress" included 4 decisions.¹⁰ The preemptive and voluntary expression of North Korea's intent to freeze nuclear development through measures such as suspending nuclear and ICBM testing and dismantling nuclear test sites reflected the desire to cultivate a favorable external environment. North Korea also called for nuclear disarmament, non-use, non-transfer, and nonproliferation. These statements have resulted in suspicions that North Korea might seek only a temporary freeze of its nuclear program while enjoying its status as a nuclear state and pursue incomplete denuclearization. There are also concerns that North Korea is intentionally limiting its remarks to future nuclear weapons without referring to its past and current nuclear capabilities.¹¹

While pursuing its Byungjin policy, North Korea had emphasized 'cultivating an advantageous external environment.' But at the 3rd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee of the 7th term of the WPK, fostering a favorable external environment through 'ties and dialogue with the international community' was stressed, as an 'advantageous environment' had already been created with the completion of its nuclear arsenal. While the Byungjin policy was being pursued, the term 'advantageous' referred to the diversification of trade relations and more lively diplomatic

of nuclear weapons and the non-transfer of nuclear weapons and technology under the condition that there are no nuclear threats or provocations, ■ Connecting to and conversing with the international community to build a socialist economy.

10 ■ Focus all of the system's projects on the building of a socialist economy, ■ Strengthen the role of the Party, workers' associations, government organs, legal organs, and the military to the pursuit of the first goal, ■ Order Party organs and other political organizations to comprehensively oversee and guide the implementation of the decisions made at the plenary meeting, ■ Demand that the committees of the Supreme People's Assembly and the Cabinet undertake legal, administrative, and practical measures for the implementation of decisions made at the plenary meeting.

11 Hyojong Song, "Assessing the Implications of the 3rd Plenary Meeting of the 7th Term of the WPK(in Korean)," *KIDA Weekly Forum* 1716(18-15)(2018).

activities, but the meaning had changed to the completion of nuclear development by the plenary meeting. This shift appears to have been intended to highlight the importance of cultivating a favorable external environment.

Strategic considerations appear to have mattered greatly in North Korea's decision to first declare the early but partial completion of its nuclear program, and then to change its policies in order to cultivate a favorable external environment for economic development. North Korea appears to have perceived the completion of its nuclear arsenal as a task that it absolutely needed to complete for regime survival and national security, to become a military power and secure deterrence against nuclear war, despite anticipating stronger sanctions for its nuclear tests and ICBM test-launches. Declaring the early but partial completion of its nuclear program would allow North Korea to quickly change the direction of its policy to alternative domestic and foreign policy, to concentrate on economic development and foster a favorable external environment. Lastly, North Korea seems to have concluded that abandoning key parts of its nuclear program in the form of suspending operations and dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear facility would create momentum for economic growth.

Meanwhile, the strategic interests of North Korea coincided with the Moon administration's active invitations to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, which South Korea had defined as the peace Olympics. This meant that North Korea likely considered the Games as a way to change the overall situation and declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal early with the timing of the Olympics in mind.

North Korea began to cooperate with the engagement policies of South Korea and the U.S. at this time. In his 2018 New Year's statement, Kim Jong-un revealed his desire to improve inter-Korean relations by expressing the nation's intent to participate in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.¹² A high-level delegation which included 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong and President of the Presidium of the Supreme

People's Assembly Kim Yong-nam attended the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang Games, and Kim Yo-jong conveyed Kim Jong-un's invitation to Pyongyang to President Moon Jae-in. As a result, a South Korean delegation which was headed by director of the National Security Office Chung Eui-yong and included director of the National Intelligence Service Suh Hoon visited North Korea from March 5 to 6, 2018, and an agreement on hosting an inter-Korean summit meeting in late April was reached during their visit. This led to the historic Panmunjom inter-Korean summit meeting on April 27, 2018.

The Panmunjom Declaration included initiatives such as ■ comprehensive and epochal improvement and development in inter-Korean relations, ■ removal of the danger of war, ■ cooperation to build a permanent and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula, ■ declaring the end of the Korean War within the year, and ■ complete denuclearization on the Korean peninsula. On May 26, a subsequent inter-Korean summit meeting was held in the northern areas of Panmunjom at a working-level in preparation for the first U.S.-North Korea summit scheduled for June 12. After the Singapore Agreement was reached through the U.S.-North Korea summit talks, the two Koreas held the third inter-Korean summit meeting in Pyongyang from September 18-20. This meeting resulted in the September 19 Pyongyang Joint Declaration and the Agreement on the Implementation of the Historic Panmunjom Declaration in the Military Domain or the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). The Pyongyang Joint Declaration included important agreements on specific measures to implement the Panmunjom Declaration, as well as other measures such as the permanent dismantlement of North Korea's Dongchang-ri missile test site and Yongbyon nuclear facilities. Meanwhile, the CMA included basic measures for operational arms control such as creating buffer zones on land, at sea, and in the air to eliminate the threat of war and build mutual trust in order to alleviate hostilities in the relationship. Kim Jong-un would continue his regime's conciliatory attitude towards South Korea in 2019.

12 "New Year's Statement by Kim Jong-un," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2018.

In his New Year's statement, Kim Jong-un highly valued the progress in inter-Korean relations made the previous year by describing 2018 as a 'vibrant year' and a 'year during which inter-Korean relations has entered an entirely new phase.'

In sum, North Korea sought to improve inter-Korean relations from the perspective of cultivating a favorable external environment to concentrate all its efforts on economic development during this period. North Korea's South Korea policy was pursued by recognizing South Korea's role as a mediator as the regime tried to use inter-Korean relations as a stepping stone for improved bilateral relations with the U.S.

2) Isolationist Strategy of Engaging in a Head-on Breakthrough Battle for Economic Development and Aggressive Strategy on South Korea based on Prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea

The U.S. and North Korea hosted their second bilateral summit meeting in Hanoi from February 27 to 28, 2019. But despite South Korea's active attempts at mediation, the two sides failed to reach a deal due to disagreements on the degree to which nuclear facilities were to be dismantled and the extent to which sanctions would be lifted. Following the Hanoi summit, North Korea began to either refuse or reject South Korea's role as a facilitator. During a press conference in Pyongyang on March 15, 2019, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son-hui noted that "South Korea is a player, not a mediator." And on April 12, 2019, Kim Jong-un demanded that South Korea "should not try to be a meddling mediator or facilitator but instead act as an involved Party that represents the interests of the people" during his administrative speech to the 1st meeting of the 14th term of the Supreme People's Assembly. Kim Jong-un further denounced the dependent attitude of South Korea on the U.S., claiming that "neither progress in inter-Korean relations nor peace and prosperity can be expected without fundamentally eliminating America's antiquated arrogance and hostile policies."

At the same time, however, Kim Jong-un also mentioned his willingness

to meet if the U.S. changed its attitude during his administrative speech, and stated that his regime would be waiting for a positive response. Following this statement, North Korea clearly changed its policy to prioritize the U.S. over South Korea, to exclude South Korea from the process and reach a bargain with the U.S. directly. On June 27, 2019, the director-general of the department of U.S. affairs of North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Kwon Jong-gun stated through a statement that "talks between the U.S. and North Korea are an issue that does not involve the South Korean government." He further claimed that "we can use direct lines of communication with the U.S. if we have something to discuss, and we will never go through South Korea since we can sit directly with the U.S. if negotiations resume." Later, North Korea fiercely denounced the South Korean government regarding joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises through statements by the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 6 and the spokesperson for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland on August 16.¹³

As the U.S. refused to withdraw hostile policies which North Korea had stated as the precondition for the resumption of talks, North Korea declared its policy of 'engaging in a head-on breakthrough battle' based on the core principles of self-reliance and strengthening capabilities internally through the 5th plenary meeting of the 7th term of the Party Central Committee in late December 2019. This was despite the surprising trilateral summit meeting at Panmunjom on June 30 and the working-level talks between the U.S. and North Korea in Stockholm on October 4-5. Reporting to the plenary meeting, Kim Jong-un emphasized "obtaining victory in the head-on breakthrough battle through strong political, diplomatic, and military offensives," and expressed the regime's intent to continue enhancing military capabilities through "the development of strategic weapons systems that will make our military and technological strengths inevitable."

13 Seong-chang Cheong, "Assessing 10 Years of the Kim Jong-un Regime's South Korea Policy and Anticipating the Future (in Korean)," *proceedings from the international webinar co-hosted by the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES) and Freidrich Haumann Foundation (FHF)* (2021), pp. 230-231.

The strategy of a head-on breakthrough battle can be interpreted as a North Korean-style isolationist policy to further strengthen its capabilities internally based on the perception that a prolonged stalemate in bilateral relations with the U.S. was unavoidable.

North Korea policy vis-à-vis South Korea became visibly more aggressive after the principle of prioritizing the U.S. over South Korea and the strategy of a head-on breakthrough battle were adopted. Beginning in 2020, North Korea began to criticize the sending of propaganda leaflets by nongovernmental organizations in South Korea. In her statement on June 4, 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong denounced the Moon administration for abetting the sending of leaflets. And at a review meeting of departments related to South Korea held on June 8, North Korea subsequently decided to transform all policies towards South Korea into 'adversarial policies' and to terminate all channels of communications between the two Koreas as of noon on June 9. These measures culminated with the destruction of the inter-Korean Liaison Office on June 16.

But despite these escalatory measures, North Korea's aggressive stance towards South Korea began to ease as Kim Jong-un postponed the General Staff of the KPA's plans for military action against North Korea proposed during a meeting of the Party Central Military Commission. Kim Jong-un would follow this up with a conciliatory message in his statement at the military parade commemorating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the WPK on October 10, 2020, during which he stated that he "hoped for the day where the two Koreas hold hands once more." And in response to the shooting of a South Korean public servant in the West Sea that occurred on September 22, 2020, Kim Jong-un took the unprecedented step of apologizing to South Korea "for giving President Moon Jae-in and the people of South Korea a huge sense of disappointment" through a notice issued in the name of the United Front Department.

3) Preserving a Peaceful External Environment and the Principle of Conditionally Improving Inter-Korean Relations

North Korea held its 8th Party congress of the WPK in the early days of 2021 at which the policy of all-out concentration on growing the economy and the strategy of head-on breakthrough battle were reaffirmed. In addition, North Korea also proposed the preservation of a peaceful external environment as a part of its security policy.¹⁴ Preserving a peaceful external environment differs from North Korea's strategy to cultivate an advantageous external environment by improving relations with the U.S.¹⁵ Preserving a peaceful environment refers to a security strategy that seeks to focus on economic growth based on the peaceful conditions secured through nuclear deterrence and stronger military capabilities, without hopes of improved relations with the U.S.

Based on this security strategy, Kim Jong-un noted during the review of national policies at the 8th Party congress of the WPK that inter-Korean relations had now returned to the state of affairs before the Panmunjom Declaration. He also proposed three principles on inter-Korean relations;

- to maintain the position and stance on solving fundamental problems

14 During his review of projects at the 8th Party congress of the WPK, Kim Jong-un described the principle of preserving a peaceful environment as the following: "The people's military, under the guidance of the Party, has faithfully fulfilled its revolutionary responsibilities by accomplishing great achievements and miracles on the two fronts of protecting the fatherland and constructing socialism. It has soundly defended the nation's land, air, and sea while also firmly defeating threats by enemies by being alert and ready to mobilize over the past five years that have been important and tense, thereby preserving a peaceful environment for the construction of socialism." Furthermore, Kim Jong-un "ordered the revolutionary position of continuing to strengthen national security, which is the basis of the state's survival and a trustworthy guarantee of the dignity and safety of the country and its people as well as the preservation of peace."

15 During his review of projects at the 8th Party congress of the WPK, Kim Jong-un stated that "while it is true that we need an advantageous external environment for the construction of our economy, we cannot sell our dignity which we have defended with our lives for the hope of a fancy transformation."

first, ■ to cease all hostile activities against the opponent, and ■ to emphasize and faithfully implement inter-Korean agreements. He further identified measures such as the import of advanced military equipment and the conduct of joint military exercises that went against the CMA on the one hand, and interest in non-fundamental issues such as cooperation on preventive measures against the pandemic, humanitarian assistance, and individual tourist projects on the other, as the two main reasons for worsening inter-Korean relations. North Korea further claimed, ■ that a new path for better inter-Korean relations based on firm trust and conciliation may be discovered if abnormal activities of obstructing unification are thoroughly managed and their causes eliminated, ■ that the restoration and rehabilitation of inter-Korean relations are solely dependent on the attitude of South Korea and that it would reap what it sowed, ■ that there would be no more unilateral gestures of kindness towards South Korea and that the regime would only respond to the extent that justified demands are met and agreements kept, and ■ that the Spring on the Korean peninsula from three years ago could return depending on the attitude of the Korean government.

After the 8th Party congress, North Korea concentrated on internal affairs, encouraging the implementation of decisions made by the Party. With the intent to encourage the development of the economy, North Korea not only stressed the achievements made during the first year of the new five-year national economic development plan but also held the 2nd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee to review the year's economic plans and also hosted a party-wide educational meeting led by Kim Jong-un. In terms of reorganizing the system, North Korea newly established the Discipline Investigation Department, the Department of Justice for social control, and the Ministry of Political Guidance of the Military to strengthen control of the military. An uncompromising struggle against, and eradication of, anti-socialist and non-socialist occurrences were also called for at both the 8th Party congress and the cell secretaries' meeting of the WPK.

Within this context, North Korea displayed a sensitive but cautious

attitude regarding the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises conducted in early 2021. Through her statement on March 16, 2021, 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong criticized the exercises and mentioned the possibility of proportional reciprocal measures. Kim Yo-jong claimed that "war exercises and dialogue, hostility and cooperation can never coexist," threatened the disbandment of the organizations for cooperation and dialogue such as the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland and the Mt. Kumgang International Tourism Bureau, and even suggested the possibility of the CMA being terminated depending on the behavior of South Korea. It appears that North Korea could not ignore the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises that the regime had defined as a fundamental problem at the 8th Party congress, even though the regime was focused on internal affairs. When the joint military exercises began, North Korea responded with low-level provocations by test-launching a cruise missile on March 21 and a ballistic missile on March 25. It seems that North Korea had considered how higher-level provocations could worsen the situation by causing additional sanctions. Moreover, from the perspective of proportionality, it could have taken into account how the size of the military exercises had been reduced, despite a nuclear test or a test-launch of an ICBM being more conventional reactions. This may have also been the result of North Korea's intent not to push inter-Korean relations to the brink. The fact that Kim yo-jong's statement did not include the prospect of terminating the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration or the September 19 Pyongyang Joint Declaration supports this interpretation. Lastly, North Korea's response may have reflected how North Korean officials in charge of South Korea policy were politically forced to respond to the joint military exercises that they had demanded be suspended on several occasions.

North Korea has demanded the U.S. withdraw its hostile policies against the regime but has not specified what this entails. This can be perceived as an effort to secure strategic flexibility by maintaining ambiguity. North Korea has previously listed preventing additional sanctions, suspending joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises, and suspending the deployment of strategic military assets as hostile policies

by the U.S. during working-level meetings held in Stockholm in October 2019. However, it is possible that other policies may be added to the list, such as the suspension of pressure regarding human rights in North Korea, depending on the circumstances, since the list above was limited to preconditions for the working-level meetings. Revealing the entire list of measures included in what North Korea refers to as hostile policies against the regime would limit strategic flexibility as the regime would only be able to apply its principle of 'responding to goodwill with goodwill' if and when every aspect that it has mentioned is satisfied. Put differently, North Korea appears to be maintaining strategic flexibility by remaining vague about hostile policies by the U.S even when only a few of its conditions have been met.

North Korea has expressed its intent to take the initiative in inter-Korean relations using its military capabilities, as it has stated that it would "defend security and peace on the Korean peninsula, and also quicken unification, through its strong military power." This reveals that North Korea will hold South Korea's security hostage in its relationship with the U.S. on the one hand, while also trying to leverage military hegemony in its South Korea policy by demanding rewards for maintaining peace and stability in inter-Korean relations on the other. And while it has suggested a return of the 'Spring of 2018,' it nevertheless appears to be pressuring South Korea to change its stance while also diluting its unilateral approach by making the improvement of inter-Korean relations conditional on the "attitude of the South Korean government."

4) Cultivating an Advantageous External Environment for Economic Development and Proposing Preconditions under a Conciliatory South Korea Policy

North Korea held the 3rd plenary meeting of the Party Central Committee of the 8th term of the WPK from June 16 to 19, 2021, six months after the 8th Party congress. At this meeting, Kim Jong-un mentioned the possibility of dialogue by stating that North Korea needed to "be prepared for both dialogue and confrontation," while also announcing its security

strategy of actively trying to cultivate an advantageous external environment for the all-out concentration on economic development. Such a strategy may be, first, considered as a response to the Biden administration's North Korea policy that is based on diplomatic engagement with North Korea. Second, it may also be viewed as a measure to overcome the limitations of North Korea's new five-year national economic development plan based on the principle of self-sufficiency as it was announced at a time when the achievements of the plan for the first half of 2021 were reviewed.

North Korea claimed that it would take the initiative on fostering an advantageous environment for economic development, which may be interpreted as intent to escape its isolationist stance. Taking the initiative may also refer to how the regime will actively respond to the Biden administration's policies once they are implemented, and how it seeks to actively attempt to import materials and resources necessary for economic growth from South Korea and other countries. In particular, this shift in policy seems to reflect concerns about a lack of progress achieved in the five-year national economic development plan due to the prolonged closure of its borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To begin, North Korea restored the lines of inter-Korean communication on July 27, 2021. This represented an easing of North Korea's principles for improving inter-Korean relations stated during the 8th Party congress given how neither the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises nor increases to military spending, two fundamental issues raised by North Korea, had been resolved. This indicates that North Korea's reference to initiative-taking might be related to its South Korea policy. But in her statements on August 1 and August 10, 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong denounced the joint military exercises and temporarily closed the channels of communication. They were restored on October 4 after Kim Jong-un had promised to do so during his administrative speech to the Supreme Assembly on September 24.

When President Moon proposed the declaration of the end of the Korean War during his keynote speech to the UN General Assembly on September 21, North Korea responded positively to the proposal but also

offered several preconditions for the improvement of inter-Korean relations. In her statement on September 24, Kim Yo-jong demanded guarantees of mutual respect as well as the withdrawal of hostile policies and double standards before a declaration of the end of the Korean War. North Korea's position was that while the declaration was itself "a positive measure," a declaration of the end of the Korean War while hostile policies against the regime remained was nothing more than an illusion and thus premature.¹⁶ North Korea would issue a statement the next day on September 25 expressing its intent to engage in constructive discussions for the restoration of inter-Korean relations and paths forward for the relationship, on the condition of careful rhetoric by the South Korean government and the suspension of hostile activities. The statement mentioned better communication between the two Koreas through the restoration of communication channels, declaration of the end of the Korean War, reconstruction of the inter-Korean Liaison Office, and a possible inter-Korean summit meeting.¹⁷ North Korea's stance on inter-Korean relations was confirmed as Kim Jong-un reiterated the preconditions proposed by Kim Yo-jong during this administrative speech to the Supreme Assembly on September 29.

There are a couple of aspects of North Korea's stance during this period that are noteworthy. North Korea has linked the declaration of the end of the Korean War with South Korea's suspension of its increases in military spending. North Korea has increased its level of criticism of South Korea's efforts to increase military spending through various mediums.

This is evidence of North Korea's sensitivity regarding South Korea's increased military spending, and a message to South Korea that it should either choose between more military spending or the declaration of the end of the Korean War. This appears to be based on three considerations.

16 "Statement by the 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong," *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA), September 24, 2021.

17 "Statement by the 1st Deputy Director of the WPK Kim Yo-jong," *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA), September 25, 2021.

First, North Korea may be concerned that it may lose the initiative in inter-Korean relations if the military balance, which North Korea believes is the only area in which it has the upper hand, considering the widening gap in overall state power between the two Koreas, shifts in South Korea's favor as it catches up or overtakes North Korea's military capabilities. Second, North Korea may also be worried about how the arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the 1980s caused the latter's economic difficulties and eventual collapse. While South Korea has been able to increase its military spending based on its massive economy, North Korea lacks the funds and resources to invest in strengthening its military. Third, the intensifying security dilemma precipitated by arms races inhibits the fostering of an advantageous external environment in which North Korea can concentrate all its efforts on growing the economy.

Despite these concerns, Kim Jong-un stressed the need to strengthen national defense at the Convention for National Defense Development on October 11, 2021. His speech emphasized ■ how double standards must be avoided since North Korea's efforts to strengthen its military is in response to the continued increases in military spending by the U.S. and South Korea, ■ how North Korea would make every effort necessary for peace on the Korean peninsula but would also not give up its right to self-defense, and ■ how successes in the military industry would be transferred to the people's economy. An interesting aspect from the speech was Kim Jong-un's mentioning that "our primary enemy is war itself, and not South Korea, the U.S., or any specific country or actor." This can be viewed as a message to South Korea and the U.S. not to treat North Korea as their enemy and to withdraw their hostile policies against the regime from the perspective of 'opening a new era of peace' as agreed upon in the Panmunjom Declaration or in the hopes of 'establishing new relations between the U.S. and North Korea' as stated in the Singapore Joint Agreement.¹⁸

18 Geedong Lee, "Kim Jong-un's Speech Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of the WPK and North Korea's Foreign Policy and South Korea Policy (in Korean)," *INSS Issue Brief* 215, October 14, 2021.

VI. Conclusion: Policy Implications

As discussed above, North Korea's policies vis-à-vis South Korea have largely been predicated on a security strategy that is subject to, and designed to realize, North Korea's overall national strategy. The following policy implications can be inferred based on this analysis.

First, North Korea's security strategy has adaptively reacted to changes in the environment as the regime has pursued its national strategy, and North Korea's South Korea policy has consequently been makeshift rather than based on certain principles or precepts. For example, North Korea transitioned to a conciliatory attitude towards South Korea just six months after the 8th Party congress of the WPK by setting forth a security strategy intended to take the initiative on fostering an advantageous external environment, even though it had stated the preconditions of solving fundamental issues first and improving inter-Korean relations conditionally. This shift in policy appears to have been influenced by both foreign and domestic factors such as the announcement of its North Korea policy by the Biden administration and lackluster progress in the new five-year national economic development plan. Preparations need to be made for the prospect of North Korea's security strategy changing based on the given conditions and circumstances, and the regime's South Korea policy changing as a result as well. Therefore, South Korea's policies vis-à-vis North Korea should focus on feasible and sustainable areas considering the inconsistency of North Korea's security strategy and South Korea policy.

Second, North Korea can be expected to tie the suspension of South Korea's increased military spending to the improvement of inter-Korean relations, including the declaration of the end of the Korean War, given the regime's sensitive responses on the issue. This is because increased military spending by South Korea is feared by North Korea to result in the loss of its initiative in inter-Korean relations, and as an obstacle to the implementation of its five-year national economic development plan due to how it compels North Korea to increase its own military spending as a

result of the security dilemma. Therefore, it appears North Korea will explore ways in which it can stop increased military spending by South Korea at an early stage. This consequently means that South Korea must continue to increase military spending in order to fulfill the conditions necessary for wartime operational control (OPCON) but, at the same time, be ready for possible arms restriction or arms control agreements with North Korea. This is because these specific measures are an appropriate and legitimate response to North Korea's demands on this issue.

Third, the logical problems found in North Korea's argument that the declaration of the end of the Korean War requires certain preconditions or in another claim that such a declaration is too early must be highlighted. If joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises and increased military spending by South Korea are obstacles to declaring the end of the Korean war as North Korea claims, North Korea also needs to make its own efforts to fulfill the preconditions. Through the September 19 CMA, the two Koreas have already agreed to discuss these preconditions at the inter-Korean Military Committee. Therefore, North Korea should be reminded that its participation in the Military Committee to begin discussions is the right and rational thing to do, rather than waiting for South Korea to meet their demands.

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Sectoral Assessment of Kim Jong-un's Decade in Power: The Creation and Stabilization of the Kim Jong-un Regime's Monolithic Rule

Gyeong-Seob Oh and Jin-Ha Kim*

This article analyzes the elite and popular control policies pursued by Kim Jong-un upon inheriting power, which aimed at creating and stabilizing a system of monolithic rule. His elite management strategies involved purging core elites who had formed part of a guardianship system, and reconstituting the ruling coalition so as to induce loyalty amongst the elite. His popular policies sought to check and reverse the disaffection with the regime through the pursuit of what was termed a 'popular masses first' policy. Over a decade in charge, Kim's elite and popular policies have proven successful in constructing and stabilizing a system of monolithic rule.

Keywords: Kim Jong-un, Ruling Coalition, Purges, Popular Control, Popular Masses First

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I . Introduction

This article aims to analyze the elite and popular control policies of the Kim Jong-un regime over the past decade in order to assess their successes and limitations in the construction of a monolithic leadership system and the stabilization of the new regime's powerbase. It was unclear when Kim took office whether he could stabilize the regime under his authority. Prior to his internal selection as successor in late 2008, he had no political power, nor any political accomplishments. And he only had three years, between 2009 and 2011, to learn how to lead the country.

Kim Jong-un had to overcome two important challenges in order to stabilize his grip on power. First, he had to deal with the challenge of the elites that comprised the ruling coalition, and second, he had to face down potential popular opposition. These are the two challenges that autocratic regimes must resolve in order to survive.¹ Autocrats respond to the former through elite policies, while they face the latter through measures that target the masses. They have two important tools when making elite and popular policies: repression and co-optation.² Dictators use repression to control elites and the masses. Dictators who lack a strong state apparatus of repression face a high chance of losing power.³ Co-optation involves overpaying supporters with rents in the form of political power, economic wealth and privileges, ideological satisfaction, social honors *inter alia* in excess of their real value for their loyalty and in order to foster unity.⁴

Elite policies aim to prevent elite challenges, strengthen the cohesion of

1 Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Natasha Lindstaedt, and Erica Frantz, *Democracies & Authoritarian Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 102-107.

2 *Ibid.*, 107-111.

3 Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 141-143.

4 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38-39.

the elite system, and induce loyalty. Kim Jong-un reconstituted the ruling coalition through purges. Kim Jong Il had established a guardianship system of his own clients to support his son's succession. However, the members of the guardianship system had not been checked for their loyalty to Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-un removed the members of the guardianship system who he could not trust or who he saw as threatening and reconstituted the ruling coalition. The new ruling coalition was composed of elites whose loyalty to Kim had been vetted.⁵ Many members of the guardianship system were purged. These large-scale purges made the elite believe that Kim Jong-un was strong, that challenges to his power would not be tolerated, and that any elite attempt on power would fail.⁶

Kim Jong-un provided appropriate compensation to maintain the loyalty of elites. He constructed a system of compensation that made elites believe that if they were loyal, they would be rewarded with the possibility of high office within the Party.⁷ What is more, the core elite also enjoyed the privilege of the highest standards of clothing, food, and housing. Their children were classed as members of the core strata, and thus accorded privileged access to education, party membership, employment, promotions et al. Further, promotion to high-level positions brings with it economic wealth. Promotion to high office allows elites more access to rent seeking opportunities.

Popular policies aim to induce spontaneous support amongst the masses and prevent political opposition from arising. All dictatorial regimes must obtain the support of the masses in order to control society. Whether the people enthusiastically support the regime, or merely respond to repression with compliance, if the masses can be mobilized, then dictatorial regimes survive. If support from the people is insufficient, this energizes the anti-regime opposition.⁸ Following the succession of power,

5 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 10.

6 Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1987), 151-166.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Natasha M. Ezrow and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 55.

the people were uncertain whether to support Kim Jong-un. This is because they had learnt little about him following his emergence as a successor in 2009. Obtaining the support of the masses was a core task facing the nascent Kim Jong-un regime, and it acted accordingly.

The Kim Jong-un regime's popular policies had two sides. On the one hand, they blocked avenues to political opposition through the existing systems of surveillance and repression. On the other, they sought the spontaneous support of the North Korean people. The Kim Jong-un regime emphasized the Mount Paekdu bloodline in order to firmly establish Kim Jong-un's legitimacy, and constructed the image of a "people's leader." While pursuing a "people-centered policy," the regime asserted that "a popular-masses first politics" was fundamental to the way politics under socialism should be carried out.

This article is divided into five parts. The second part discusses the theoretical background and analytical framework. The third part analyzes the Kim Jong-un regime's elite policies, while the fourth considers its popular policies. The fifth sets out conclusions.

II. Theoretical Background

In all political systems, professional politicians act as political entrepreneurs in a self-interested manner to ensure their survival and to maintain their position.⁹ In a manner of speaking, all seek "to come to power, to stay in power and, to the extent that they can, to keep control over money."¹⁰ Under dictatorial systems, political institutionalization and transparency are low,¹¹ and uncertainty and the possibility of violence rule

9 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: HarperPrennial, 1975), 269-273; Barbara Geddes, *Politician's Dilemma: Building State Capacity in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 24-42.

10 Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 10.

11 In this article, we use "dictatorship" and "authoritarian system" interchangeably.

the political sphere. In this kind of environment, politicians' pursuit of survival is necessarily extreme. This is because the moment power is lost, one falls from one's social and economic position and one can also lose one's life. Thus the dictator will use all their energies to stabilize their rule.¹²

The largest task facing a dictator is survival. To survive, the dictator must block potential challenges from the elite, and the threat of uprising from below. The key to maintaining the stability of dictatorship is preventing an elite challenge. The threat to a dictator of potentially losing in an elite power struggle or falling to a coup d'état is very high.¹³ Between 1946 and 2008, more than two-thirds of dictators were removed by coups or revolts from inside the elite.¹⁴ And between 1946 and 2004, some 47% of dictators who lost power met a harsh fate in the form of prison, exile, or even death.¹⁵ Dictators who preside over personalist regimes, in particular, face a higher possibility of an unpleasant fate than military or single-Party regime dictators.¹⁶

Dictators must also block potential threats from below. All dictatorial regimes must attain the support of the masses to gain control over society. Dictators, so long as they can mobilize the people, regardless of whether they receive the enthusiastic support of the masses, or their compliance in the face of oppression, they can survive. When the support of the people for the regime is insufficient, resistance movements become more active.¹⁷ Under dictatorial regimes, the death of a dictator is highly likely to lead to regime change if pro-democracy protests occur.¹⁸

12 Mesquita and Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*, 11-12.

13 Barbara Geddes, Joseph G. Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 170; Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125.

14 Milan W. Slolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 5.

15 Abel Escriba-Folch, "Accountable for What? Regime Types, Performance, and the Fate of Outgoing Dictators, 1946-2004," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 160.

16 *Ibid.*, 176.

17 Natasha M. Ezrow and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, 55.

The popular policies of authoritarian regimes are two-sided. First, the regime does not treat all its people equally. It provides incentives to its supporters through institutions. This is because the people respond to the incentives provided by the regime.¹⁹ Incentives to supporters represent the core of political rule for dictatorial regimes. Such regimes levy taxes to acquire the resources in order to provide incentives to their supports.²⁰ All available means are mobilized to secure the necessary resources for the maintenance of the regime.

Opponents are thoroughly repressed or taxed.²¹ Where dictatorial regimes are generous in their treatment of political opposition, this can deepen regime instability. More repressive dictatorships do not permit the existence of independent civic organizations, and do not allow their citizens to have political freedoms or freedoms of association and protest. If opposition protests occur, they are suppressed ruthlessly, with protestors potentially gunned down if needed be. Even if the people oppose the dictatorial regime, they are often thoroughly blocked from organizing anti-government protests.

Following his succession to power, Kim Jong-un's major task was to prevent either an elite challenge or a popular rebellion. He had forces that were far superior to the elites of the ruling coalition. Hereditary succession is an indicator that proves the consolidation of a personalist dictatorial system.²²

18 Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Natasha Lindstaedt, and Erica Frantz, "When Dictators Die," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (October, 2016).

19 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, 4; Natasha M. Ezrow and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, 55-56.

20 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, 26; Mesquita, Bueno de and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 25, 75.

21 Ronald Wintrobe, *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*, p. 4; Natasha M. Ezrow, and Erica Frantz, *Dictators and Dictatorships: Understanding Authoritarian Regimes and Their Leaders*, 55-56.

22 Jason Brownlee, "Hereditary Succession in Modern Autocracies," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 595-628.

North Korea has concentrated high level of power in the hands of its supreme leader, and has done so now over three generations. This means that all potential competitors have either been removed or made into clients.

Yet, in spite of the fact that Kim possessed considerable power, his succession was the most dangerous moment he faced. Even when power succession occurs from within the ruling coalition in accordance with processes recognized as legitimate, the replacement of the top leader is a hazardous time.²³ It is unclear whether ruling elites who have been obedient to the previous leader will be loyal to the blood successor who has yet to gain a firm grip on power. Periods of power succession in a personalist dictatorial system are the time when the future of the regime is decided – the ultimate test of the regime's durability.²⁴

Kim Jong Il received sufficient guidance under his healthy father's tutelage and was the object of an idolization campaign for a sustained period long before he actually took over the reins of power. From the mid-1970s,²⁵ with the position of "Party Center" that connoted his status as successor he was able to form a patrimonial ruling coalition.²⁶ As dictator, he also had sufficient time to acquire the necessary political and organizational experience.²⁷ However, in late 2011, Kim Jong-un succeeded his father to

23 Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 184-185.

24 Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987), pp. 151-166.

25 Under Kim Jong Il's leadership, the North Korean-style personalistic system centered on the dictator was firmly established programmatically by the Ten Principles on the Firm Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Ideological System in 1974. The unveiling of these principles can be seen as an official announcement of Kim Jong Il's succession. In-ho Song, "Considering the Ten Principles on the Firm Establishment of the Party's Monolithic Ideological System," *Legal Theses* 43, no. 1 (2019): 145-176.

26 Alexandre Y. Mansourov, "Emergence of the Second Republic: The Kim Regime Adapts to the Challenges of Modernity," in *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival*, eds. Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), pp. 37-58.

27 Tae-seop Lee, "The Establishment of the Kim Jong Il Successor System and the Politics of 'Unity'," *Review of North Korean Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 11-51.

power just three years after being designated as a successor. Kim Jong-un took the reins of power with the support of a guardianship system composed of his father's clients.²⁸ In spite of Kim Jong-un's lack of political experience, he was forced to rapidly stabilize power by putting down elite challenges and dealing with potential popular opposition, while inducing popular support and loyalty. During his decade in power, Kim Jong-un has pursued survival and to stabilize his power through a distinct set of policies targeting the elite and the masses.

III. Controlling the Ruling Elite

1. The politics of purges and the reconstruction of the monolithic system of rule

The secret to the North Korean system's longevity is its patrimonial ruling elite management. However, in spite of this strong tradition of patrimonial dictatorship, the Kim Jong-un regime faced a harsh set of circumstances in its early stages that put its survival in doubt.²⁹ On both the domestic and foreign front, the environment was unenviable: economic collapse, international isolation, the spread of markets,³⁰ and declining loyalty amongst the North Korean public. The Kim Jong-un regime had no choice but to be harsher in its control policies if it was to induce loyalty amongst the elite and the general public.

The first task facing Kim Jong-un in stabilizing his grip on power was to assert control over the guardianship system that had aided his succession. The elites who had aided Kim Jong-un were a group of his father's clients. The

28 Jin-Ha Kim, "The Kim Jong-un Regime's Policies Toward South Korea: Analysis of the Origins of Its Circular Provocation Strategy and Its Patterns since the Succession of Power," *National Defense Research* 57, no. 1 (2014): 46-47.

29 Jin-Ha Kim, "North Korea's Succession Plan: Stability and Future Outlook," Korea University Ilmin International Research Institute (IIRI)-MacArthur Foundation Working Paper, no. 8 (December 2010).

30 Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011), 45-118.

people who had stood beside Kim Jong Il's hearse, Jang Song Thaek, Kim Ki Nam, Choe Thae Bok, Ri Yong Ho, Kim Yong Chun, Kim Jong Gak, and U Dong Chuk were key members of the guardianship system. However, they also could potentially become the biggest obstacles to the creation of a monolithic power system. This is because they could lead elite resistance and revolt. Jang Song Thaek, in particular, was a potential threat to the stability of Kim Jong-un's power.³¹

Thus, Kim Jong-un removed the core elites of the guardianship system that he could not trust. Through large-scale purges, he averted the possibility of elite challenge, and was able to bring the security services that they had managed fully under his control.³² Prior to fully consolidating his grip on power at the 7th Party Congress in 2016, Kim Jong-un purged elites that he did not trust. As can be seen in the <Table III-1> below, over the first five years of his rule, Kim Jong-un purged or executed some 260 senior Party, state, and military officials.

31 Ken E. Gause, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics under Kim Jong-un* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2015), 39.

32 Seung-yeol Lee, "Changes in North Korea's Ruling Bureaucracy under Kim Jong-un and Its Policy Implications," *National Assembly Legislative Survey Office NARS Current Issues Analysis*, no. 100 (December 31, 2019), 1.

<Table 1> Size of purges during Kim Jong-un's first five years (2012~16)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total	
#	Killed	5	30	40	60	Unknown	130
	Purged	5	30	100	130	30	260
Officials executed/purged	Kim Chol (Ministry of People's Armed Forces Vice Minister) Pak Yong Mu (Director Secretariat) Ri Yong Ho (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff)	Jang Song Thaek Ri Yong Ha Jang Su Gil Paek Yong Chol around 30 individuals	Pak Chun Hong Kim Kun Sop Mun Kyong Dok Pyon In Son Ma Won Chun around 36 individuals executed	Jo Yong Nam (Deputy Chairman of the State Planning Commission) Hyon Yong Chol (Minister of People's Armed Forces) Choe Yong Gon (Deputy Premier) Rim Jong Chu (Ministry of State Security) Kim Ok (Secretariat) etc.	Kim Yong Jin (Deputy Premier)	*2017 Ministry of State Security and five others executed(Kim Won Hong) Hwang Pyong So(purged)	

* Source: Oh Gyeong-seob et al., *Composition and Dynamics of the Kim Jong-un Regime Core Elite Group* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification, 2019), p. 153.

Military-first politics under Kim Jong Il led to the military becoming bloated. It was thus the military that became the main target. Acquiring control over the armed forces was crucial in determining the fate of the Kim Jong-un regime. Kim Jong-un strengthened his control over the military through purges, frequent personnel rotations, dishonorable demotions et al. in order to prevent it from becoming the base for a potential rebellion. Within the military, elders like Kim Yong Chun and Kim Jong Gak, as well as newer commanders like Ri Yong Ho, Hyon Yong Chol, and Pyon In Son were purged or even executed.³³ From taking power up until the 7th Party Congress in 2016, Kim Jong-un had replaced his Defense Minister six times (as of 2021, he had done so ten times), and replaced his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on five occasions.

33 "Executions by firing squad, purges, firings...Five years of Kim Jong-un-style reign of terror," *VCA* (May 3, 2017).

The Head of the General Political Bureau (GPB) of the Korean People's Army was subjected to special treatment. In October 2017, the Party's Organization and Guidance Department launched a large-scale investigation into the GPB, and its then-head Hwang Pyong So and other high-level officials were purged. Furthermore, Kim Jong-un stressed the need for occupational expertise (military professionalism) in the military command, and closed off ways for military commanders to intervene in politics.³⁴ The Party Bylaws amended at the 8th Party Congress in 2021 stipulate that the military is "the revolutionary armed forces of the Workers' Party of Korea that upholds the leadership of the Party," confirming clearly the Party's superior status and command over the military.³⁵

The reign of terror that Kim Jong-un instituted with his purges of the senior ranks of the military and the elites that surrounded him also led to the further politization and excessive growth of the country's public security (regular police) and state security (political police) apparatus. The expansion of the secret police and public security institutions under a dictatorship poses a threat like that of the military, just like the expansion of the military's increased intervention in politics. Thus, in order to induce loyalty in the security services, Kim Jong-un also purged their principal leadership, or sought to foster inter-agency competition. To curtail the further expansion of the Ministry of State Security's (MSS) influence, Kim purged Kim Won Hong (Minister of State Security) and senior officials of the MSS who had led the purge of Jang Song Thaek and the Party's Administrative Department (over which Jang had presided).³⁶ The MSS's powers were shrunk and Party control strengthened. In the process, the Party's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), the

34 Gyu Ho Heo and Gyeong Mo An, "The Role of Military Commanders in the Kim Jong-un Period and Changes in the Character of Military Command: The Rise of Occupational Expertise," *National Defense Policy Research* 35, issue 4 (2019), 70-101.

35 "Decision adopted confirming revisions to the Workers' Party of Korea's Party Bylaws at the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 10, 2021).

36 "Kim Jong-un's high-level purges and executions: Minister of State Security Kim Won Hong," *RFA* (February 11, 2019).

General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army (GPB), and the MSS were played off against one another, and competed to demonstrate their superior loyalty.

Further, to prevent the MSS and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) from concentrating power in their hands and to stop them from expanding their political influence, the number of policing and legal institutions was expanded and inter-agency rivalry also fermented. The GPB, the MSS, and the MPS and even the OGD found themselves with new competitors. The oversight institutions within the Party and military, which had previously not had any actual power, found their status and duties expanded. For instance, at the 8th Party Congress in 2021, the Party's Central Inspection Committee saw its power greatly expanded, turning it into a power institution charged with presiding over Party financial management activities, and the screening and handling of complaints and petitions related to Party discipline. Moreover, new departments of Party Disciplinary Investigations and Legal Affairs were created under the Party Secretariat. The Department of Disciplinary Investigations is an organization set up to investigate breaches of the Party rules committed by Party organizations and Party members that are against the monolithic rule of Kim Jong-un. The Department of Legal Affairs is believed to supervise the judicial, social security and state security organs just like what the Party's Administrative Department did in the past.³⁷

2. Restructuring the Party-dominated ruling coalition and taming the elite

As a hereditary successor, Kim Jong-un transitioned from the "Military-first" policy of his father to a "Party-first" policy.³⁸ The Party

37 Gyeong-seob Oh and Jin-ha Kim, "Analysis of the Eighth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (3): the Political Sector," *Korean Institute for National Unification Online Series*, CO 21-03 (January 15, 2021), 4, accessed September 5, 2021, <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/0b0644c6-3b00-4a77-bd aa-09f1c172b724>.

38 Yong-han Pak and Eun-gyeong Kwak, "Assessing the Stability of the Kim Jong-un Regime and the Sustainability of the North Korean System," *Strategic Research* 27, no. 2

emerged as a general power platform for the dictator's clients.³⁹ The Party's status as the central locus of political power was reconfirmed through the 8th Party Congress in 2021 with the Party bylaws stating: "as the highest form of political organization, the Party's authority shall be thoroughly guaranteed".⁴⁰ The Party has thus become the center of power under the Kim Jong-un regime. Personnel and organizational changes, as well as changes to the major state policy that can impact the stability of Kim's powerbase are unveiled through major meetings of the Party and through Party institutions.

The establishment of Kim Jong-un's monolithic system of rule with the Party at its center raised the status of the Party's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), and the Agitation and Propaganda Department (APD). The OGD in particular demonstrated considerable influence after the purge of Jang Song Thaek and the dissolution of the Party Administrative Department.⁴¹ As Kim Jong-un's power increased, the OGD's authority and status were strengthened further still. Despite the volatility of the power elite, Jo Yong Won's status has continued to rise since 2017, recently being elected to the Presidium of the Politburo and Secretary Responsible for Organizational Matters.⁴²

However, Kim Jong-un also expressed guardedness about such developments, and the OGD began to see its power checked. For instance, at the Second Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee in October 2017, the first deputy director of the OGD, Jo Yon Jun, known as the hidden master manipulator of purge politics including Jang Song Thaek and the real power in the OGD,⁴³ was de facto demoted. What is more, as noted above, the creation

(2020): 69.

39 "Kim Jong-un era, 'Party-first' rather than 'Military-first,'" *VOA* (October 8, 2015).

40 *Rodong Sinmun* (January 10, 2021).

41 Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *Composition and Dynamics of the Kim Jong-un Regime Core Elite Group*, 163-164.

42 "North Korean 'key man behind the throne' Jo Yong Won, Organization and Guidance Deputy Director," *VOA* (February 3, 2017).

43 "Jo Yon Jun reportedly suggested to 'make an internal target' to advocate for Jang Song Thaek's purge," *JoongAng Ilbo* (December 12, 2013); "A major planner

of the new departments for Disciplinary Investigations and Legal Affairs led to the partial dispersion of the OGD's previously concentrated authority.

After purging close associates of his father, including Jang Song Thaek, Ri Yong Ho, and Hyon Yong Chol, Kim Jong-un reconstructed the ruling coalition. His father's close associates were potentially dangerous because they could have led elite resistance. In 2017, Kim Jong-un also had his half-brother Kim Jong Nam assassinated – Kim Jong Nam could potentially have become a political rival. Sanctions led to the continued shrinking of the resources needed to maintain the regime, and this meant that Kim Jong-un needed to further reduce the size of the ruling coalition – thus spurring more harsh purges.

The ruling coalition of elites that was created by the Party Conference of early 2012, especially those elites with considerable power, had largely disappeared by the 7th Party Congress held in 2016. Five years later, at the 8th Party Congress, elites with considerable staying power over the previous decade, including Pak Pong Ju, Choe Hwi, Kim Su Gil, and Choe Bu Il, were ejected from the Politburo, and new elites introduced including Jo Yong Won, Jong Sang Hak, Kim Tu Il, Choe Sang Gon, O Il Jong, Kwon Yong Jin, Kim Jong Gwan, and Ri Yong Gil.⁴⁴ At the 7th Party Congress, 106 out of 235 members of the Central Committee (including full and candidate members) were reelected, while 129 members were new, i.e., a full 54.9% of members were new.⁴⁵ Choe Ryong Hae is a key elite supporting the Kim Jong-un regime. Choe lost his position in 2014 and was sent for "revolutionizing (re-)education." But he returned to power at the 7th Party Congress (2016) and was given six positions including a seat on the

of the North's purges is Jo Yon Yun," *Newsis* (May 15, 2015).

44 Seung-yeol Lee and Yeung Hyeon Lee, "Major Content and Implications of North Korean Workers' Party Eighth Congress," *National Assembly Legislative Survey Office Issues and Points of Discussion*, no. 1797 (February 9, 2021); Kibum Han, "Assessment of North Korea's Eighth Party Congress (III): Changes in Personnel, Revisions to the Party Bylaws et al.," *North Korea Research Institute INKS Opinion* (January 21, 2021).

45 Seung-yeol Lee, "Changes in North Korea's Apparatchiks under Kim Jong-un and Its Policy Implications," *NARS Analysis of Current Issues*, no. 100, 6.

Presidium of the Politburo, a Central Committee Vice Chairmanship, a Vice Chairmanship on the new State Affairs Commission (SAC), and Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly.

However, unlike Choe Ryong Hae, most higher-level cadres from the Kim Jong Il era have been purged. The positions left empty by these purges have been filled by new elites who have demonstrated their loyalty to Kim Jong-un. Thus, the ruling coalition has been reconstituted by elites loyal to Kim Jong-un. Kim's younger sister Kim Yo Jong rose dramatically, while many younger and older cadres who had weak organizational powerbases or had existed on the periphery of the ruling coalition saw their standing rise. This is one of the methods by which personalist regimes strengthen the power of patronage. Newly emergent members of the ruling coalition have only one way to survive and prosper: absolute loyalty to and by further strengthening their ties to the dictator.

Kim Jong-un sought to induce loyalty from the elite through a revolving door of demotions and reappointments, internal exile and reeducation so that no one in the elite could avoid his patrimonial cadre policies. Neither veteran cadres from the Kim Jong Il era nor new elites appointed by Kim Jong-un to top positions were immune.⁴⁶ Even when elites could avoid purges and reeducation, they were subjected to frequent Kim Jong-un-style rotation,⁴⁷ with unpredictably frequent reorganizations, changes of responsibilities, and frequent moves between the center (Pyongyang) and the provinces being unavoidable. Unlimited loyalty to the absolute power of the patrimonial dictator and competition pushes elites to seek survival at all costs. In the matrix of patrimonial rule, the ruling elite's survival rests on atop the blade of a knife. In particular, in the Kim Jong-un era, the frequency and speed of personnel rotations, and the frequency of demotions and restorations to office of high-ranking cadres is incomparable to that of the Kim Jong Il era.⁴⁸ Indeed,

46 H. E. Chehabi and Juan Linz (eds.), *Sultanistic Regimes* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3-48.

47 "Possibility of Ri Yong Gil appointment as new Minister of Defense... Kim Jong-un-style revolving door," *VCA* (July 15, 2021).

this has emerged as a feature of elite life under Kim Jong-un. This appears to be the result of economic sanctions, which have reduced financial flows to the regime and made it more difficult for it to buy the loyalty of the elite, pushing it to rely on more coercive and artificial cadre management processes. The ruling elite's number has been reduced in size, and come to resemble what has been termed an "exclusionary patrimonial system."⁴⁹

IV. Two-sided Policies Targeting the Masses

1. Utilizing institutionalized popular control systems

The North Korean regime has ruled the country through the Korean Workers' Party for the past eighty years. During this time, it has institutionalized a system of incentives for its supporters and oppression for its opponents. Kim Il Sung divided the entire North Korean population into three groups and 51 subcategories on the basis of family background and activities in society, the categories being: (1) the core strata (around 28%), (2) the hostile strata (around 45%), and (3) the waiving strata (around 27%).⁵⁰ The North Korean people have been subjected to discriminatory treatment on the basis of their origins (Chulsin Songbun). This system of Chulsin Songbun-based (origins-based) discrimination introduced under the Kim Il Sung regime has been maintained up to present, and continues to exercise substantial influence on the lives of the North Korean people.

The Songbun system is the most fundamental set of criteria applied in social life, including in the selection of new Party members, entry into

48 Ho-ryeong Lee, "Changes and Features of the Power Elite in the Kim Jong-un Era," *KIDA Brief*, no. 2021-Security-4 (July 30, 2021), 5.

49 Byeong-jin Han, "Can North Korea hold on? North Korea's future through variables of state consolidation and market reform," *Korean Political Science Association Journal* 22, issue 2 (2014): 99-118.

50 Geum-sun Lee et al., *North Korean Human Rights White Paper 2009* (Seoul: KINU, 2009), 138-140; Naewaetongsinsa, *North Korean Reality General Materials* (Seoul: Naewaetongsinsa North Korean Problems Research Institute, 1997), 141.

the armed forces, employment in administrative jobs in the Party and Cabinet, promotions *inter alia*. The Party and the state provide incentives to their supporters, the core strata, and inflict discrimination and disadvantage on their opponents, the hostile strata. The core strata are given preferential treatment in social life, including in the selection of Party members, entry into the armed forces, government and Party jobs, and promotions. Party members and those with good social standing (i.e., those serving in the military, workers, etc.) who graduate from university receive privileged treatment in the selection process for new cadres.⁵¹

Core Songbun members are given more benefits in the selection for the most sought-after job in North Korea - jobs in the diplomatic service. If an applicant's Songbun is poor, they will struggle to gain admission to the training school for diplomats, and also may not be hired as diplomats even if they were to finish training.⁵² Those found to have displayed high levels of loyalty to Kim Jong-un and the Party, and to have excellent Songbun receive privileges when screened for promotions in the Party and cabinet. Social backgrounds are also important, with those who have been discharged from the military or worked as regular (blue collar) workers being promoted more quickly than those who have worked in white collar professions (or been university students).⁵³

The North Korean regime thoroughly monitors its people in order to curtail the potential spread of political opposition, and opponents are brutally punished. This is a dragnet surveillance system. Lower-level units of the Korean Workers' Party surveils the ideological tendencies of both Party members and non-Party members and report to higher sections of the organization. The organs of surveillance and repression, including the Ministries of State and Public Security, and the Security Command

51 Jin-wook Choi, *Contemporary North Korean Administration* (Seoul: Ingansarang, 2002), 212-215.

52 Jin-ha Kim *et al.*, *North Korean Foreign Policy: Policy Patterns and Case Analysis of North Korean Nuclear Diplomacy* (Seoul: KINU, 2019), 59-60.

53 *Ibid.*, 62-71.

(within the military), monitor for, uncover and punish anti-system and anti-government activity. They have the authority to tap the phones of anyone from Central Committee cadres down to regional Party cadres, and when necessary, have them followed.⁵⁴ For instance, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), they monitor and control cadres through internal discipline. Party organizations report on all cadres and Party members. Departmental heads within MOFA report their schedule for the day one day prior to the Party committee, and MOFA's Party committee reports on the daily activities of all officials of vice minister or above within MOFA to the Party's Organization and Guidance Department.⁵⁵

Opponents are dealt harshly. Speaking privately, shortly before he was executed, then-Chief of General Staff Marshal Ri Yong Ho was caught on a hidden recording device indirectly criticizing Kim Jong-un, saying, "Did the General (Kim Jong Il) not reform and open the economy because he didn't know that doing so would mean people could live well?"⁵⁶ Similarly, eight members of the Unhasu Orchestra were executed, including the orchestra's leader, because bad rumors about Ri Sol Ju, a former member and Kim Jong-un's wife, had spread and become known to the Ministry of State Security.⁵⁷ Jang Song Thaek, cadres from the Party's Administrative Department, the 54th Department of the military, the 9th Department of the Ministry of People's Security, and from the Military Engineers General Bureau of the Ministry of People's Security were executed for conspiring to overthrow the state. A full 15 deputy directors and section chiefs from the Party Administrative Department were put to death by firing squad, while 400 were purged. All those below section head were, along with their families, sent to political prison camps. Around 300 officials from the military's 54th Department were also sent to camps.⁵⁸

54 Jang-yop Hwang, *Sunshine that Has Taken the Side of Darkness Cannot Light Up Darkness* (Seoul: Wolgan Chosun, 2001), 68-73.

55 Yong Ho Thae, *Cipher of the Third Floor Secretariat* (Seoul: Giparang, 2018), 308.

56 *Ibid.*, 309.

57 *Ibid.*, 316.

58 *Ibid.*, 322-333.

The Kim Jong-un regime has also strengthened control and punishment with respect to so-called "anti-socialist activities." Three Party meetings (the December 2019 Party Plenum, the 8th Party Congress in January 2021, and the Party Plenum of January 2021) have focused entirely on the issue of their agendas. The slogan advanced to control the masses is "let's defend socialism." And groups that crack down on anti-socialism target the inflow of South Korean culture, commercial activities, and behaviors deemed to violate socialist ideology.⁵⁹

Of late, the regime has sought to strengthen ideological control over the country's youth. The Reactionary Ideological Culture Exclusion Act passed in February 2020, aims to prevent the North Korean people from watching or reading South Korean, the U.S., or Japanese video or books through newly strengthened and draconian punishments. Because this is where North Koreans come into contact with information about capitalist societies and they could potentially become anti-system/anti-government in their outlook. When North Koreans are found to have spread South Korean films, other video, or other media, they could now face indefinite sentences in labor camps, or even the death penalty. While North Koreans who have been found to have directly seen, heard, or stored South Korean films, video, or other media - including books, songs, pictures, and photographs - would now face from five to fifteen years in a labor camp. The U.S. and Japan were both proscribed as "hostile countries," and spreading the media from these countries would result in a minimum sentence of ten years in a labor camp, and potentially even to death sentence.⁶⁰

59 "Ten Years of Kim Jong-un's Reign, Assessing Governing Strategy, Popular Policies and Popular Control," Cheol Lee, written consultation (September 25, 2021); "Assessment of Kim Jong-un Popular Policies," Kibum Han, written consultation (September 25, 2021).

60 "North Korean-style 'guilt-by association'... Family members of people who bring in and distribute South Korean contents head to political concentration camps," *Daily NK* (September 16, 2021), accessed September 20, 2021, https://www.dailynk.com/북한관_연좌제_남_콘텐츠_유입_유포자_가족_정치.

The Kim Jong-un regime has organized and operated a Combined Command for Anti-Socialist Activities that seeks to control the ideological lives of the country's youth. At the same time, it is strengthening control over the inflow and the spread of external information.⁶¹ The Supreme People's Assembly's (SPA) Standing Committee also passed the Youth Education Guarantee Act at its fifth session of the 14th SPA. The act establishes an ideological control framework that targets the youth, and seeks to block their exposure to foreign capitalist culture and media.⁶² As external sources of information have flowed into North Korean society, ideological control of the country's young has become a major issue facing the regime.

2. Establishing Kim Jong-un's authority and legitimacy

The Kim Jong-un regime has put in place policies to firmly establish Kim Jong-un's authority and legitimacy. This is because the masses must acknowledge his authority and legitimacy in order to voluntarily support him. First of all, his authority and legitimacy has been located in his symbolic blood ties to the "Paekdu Bloodline," i.e. Kim's membership of the same family as Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung. The Kim Jong-un regime utilized the "succession by bloodline" motif in the early stages of his rule in order to cement his authority and legitimacy. A text mining analysis of official documents released in Kim Jong-un's name from 2012 onward indicates that between 2012 and 2015, frequent use was made of "Kim Jong Il Patriotism" and "dying instructions." Further, Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) analysis, which is used to determine the relative importance of particular words in particular documents, indicated that "parent", "Kim Jong Il", "hero", and "Paekdu" were highly important relatively.⁶³

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² "Ten Years of Kim Jong-un's Reign, Popular Policies and Popular Control," Il-gi Kim, written consultation (September 25, 2021).

⁶³ Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *The Kim Jong-un Regime's Ruling Discourse and Sectoral Policy Change: Text-mining Analysis of Remarks and Speeches* (Seoul: KINU, 2020), 51-58.

In his 2012 New Year's Address, Kim Jong-un said that the succession of the Juche revolution's great work was important for the Party and the revolution, but that this was a time for responsibility, and emphasized the call to realize the dying instructions of Kim Jong Il. The address also set out the slogan "Respected and Beloved Kim Jong-un is [no different to] Great Comrade Kim Jong Il." To the people, realizing the dying instructions meant uniting single-heartedly around Kim Jong-un as a successor and protecting him with their lives.⁶⁴ Further, at the expanded meeting of the Central Committee's Politburo on February 19, 2015, realizing the dying instructions of Kim Jong Il was prescribed as being the primary task that must be "unconditionally accomplished."⁶⁵ Kim Jong-un intentionally sought to capitalize on the authority and legitimacy of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, who has been deified in North Korea, through the creation of symbols that associate him with Kim Il Sung and thus confer authority and legitimacy. Kim Jong-un created an image of himself as resembling Kim Il Sung, he also sought to stimulate nostalgia for his grandfather amongst the North Korean people and induce their support. Kim Jong-un has sought to imitate his grandfather's behaviors, appearance and manner of dress: he claps like his grandfather, apparently walks like him (or at least imitates his gait), sports a similar potbelly, has worn a similar coat, had his hair cut in a similar way, and has a double-chin that is also rather similar.⁶⁶

Second, Kim Jong-un has sought to create the image of a "people's leader."

64 "Let's accept the dying instructions of Great Comrade Kim Jong Il and turn 2012 into a year of glorious restoration, shining with laudable victories," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2012); "Let's press toward building a prosperous and strong fatherland, realizing Kim Jong Il Patriotism – Remarks to Responsible Officials of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party," *Rodong Sinmun* (August 3, 2012).

65 "A Korean Workers' Party Central Committee Politburo Expanded Meeting was held under the leadership of the Respected and Beloved Comrade First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party Kim Jong-un," *Rodong Sinmun* (February 19, 2015).

66 "To Sell a New Leader, North Korea Finds a Mirror Is Handy," *The New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2012, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/asia/packaging-of-kim-jong-un-in-north-korea.html>.

Before being designated as his father's successor in December 2008, Kim Jong-un was unknown to the North Korean people. To receive popular support, Kim needed to foster the appearance of a leader who had the people's interest at heart. Immediately after acceding to power, Kim Jong-un began pursuing construction projects in the capital, including of housing, rest and relaxation, and entertainment facilities, and he began making frequent visits to the construction sites to monitor progress.⁶⁷ Further, Kim Jong-un actively sought out members of the public. For instance, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on September 5, 2012, that Kim Jong-un and Ri Sol Ju (his wife) visited the home of a newly-wed couple, a teacher from Pyongyang Machinery University and a worker, who had moved into an apartment on Changjon Street, in the Mansudae area of Pyongyang. North Korea's ruler and his wife were depicted in the report as showing concern for the welfare of these newlyweds.⁶⁸

Third, the Kim Jong-un regime sought to induce voluntary popular support through ideological education. The more the people spontaneously supported the regime, the higher the level of their loyalty, and the less likely they were to renege on their support. Ideological education was divided into two kinds, education that targeted the masses, and education targeting Party members and cadres. Ideological education of the masses demanded loyalty toward the supreme leader. As Kim Jong-un emphasized in his conclusion speech to the Sixth Congress of Korean Workers' Party Cell Secretaries, the effective medicine to ensure the people are educated in a revolutionary fashion are the followings: (1) education on revolutionary tradition, (2) loyalty education, (3) education on patriotism, (4) anti-imperialist class education, and (5) moral education.⁶⁹ These five forms of education aim to firmly establish the loyalty of the people toward their leader.

67 Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *The Kim Jong-un Regime's Ruling Discourse and Sectoral Policy Change*, 73-74.

68 "North's Mr. and Mrs. Kim Jong-un, visit family house in Pyongyang," *Yonhap News* (September 5, 2012), accessed August 14, 2020, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20120905197000014>.

69 "Let's yet more aggressively engage in ideological work to cultivate people strong in ideology and hot bloodedly loyal," *Rodong Sinmun* (June 16, 2021).

In addition, the Kim Jong-un regime made efforts to ensure that the Party did not lose the support of the masses. This required that cadres and Party members made sure that the people loved the Party. Party members were to practice the "idea of working for the people as if they were the heavens," and pursue Party work that was pro-people and realistic. What is more, cadres and Party members were pushed to struggle against corruption. The first practices that the Party was to curtail and struggle against were wielding power inappropriately, bureaucratism, and corruption, with Party organizations told to be uncompromising in struggles even against small issues.⁷⁰ This was designed to stop the people from becoming discontented with the Party.

3. People-centered policy

The Kim Jong-un regime has pursued what it terms "people-centered" policies since Kim acceded to the apex of power in the late 2011. The goal of these policies was to create a popular wellspring of support for the new leader. From 2012 up to January 2020, the word "people" was the most often used in Kim Jong-un's publicly released remarks and speeches about politics.⁷¹ The Korean Workers' Party used the slogan "Everything for the people, and everything based upon the popular masses." Cadres and Party members were told they must devote themselves completely to attain the love of the masses and to serve the people.⁷²

Over the last decade, the Kim Jong-un regime has repeatedly utilized a "people-centered" discourse in major speeches given by Kim.⁷³ At the April

70 Gyeong-seob Oh and Jin-ha Kim, "Analysis of the Eighth Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (3): the Political Sector."

71 Gyeong-seob Oh et al., *The Kim Jong-un Regime's Ruling Discourse and Sectoral Policy Change*, 53

72 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un's speech to our Party, state and military at parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party foundation and Pyongyang mass demonstration," *Rodong Sinmun* (October 11, 2015); "Let's bring forward final victory through revolutionary ideological assault – Respected and Beloved Comrade Kim Jong-un's speech to the Korean Workers' Party's Eighth Ideological Worker Congress," *Rodong Sinmun* (February 26, 2014); "New Year's Address," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2013).

15, 2012 parade (organized to commemorate the centennial of Kim Il Sung's birth), Kim Jong-un declared, "it is the firm determination of our Party that the people shall never again be made to tighten their belts and that they shall enjoy socialist prosperity to their heart's content."⁷⁴ While in his speech at the October 10, 2015 parade organized to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Party's foundation, Kim said, "the authentic image of Korea is of the Party revering the people like the heavens, thinking of them as its teacher, the people boundlessly trusting the Party as its mother and following it with our single-hearted unity, and this is the cornerstone of the entire Military First Revolution."⁷⁵

At the 7th Party Congress in May 2016, Kim Jong-un declared the Party's politics to be "the popular masses first politics." The revised Party bylaws similarly stipulated that "popular masses first politics" were the fundamental political style of the Party, determining whether the Party would survive or perish, and whether socialism would succeed or fail. The Party and the state must invest everything, sparing nothing, to improve the livelihoods of the people. Cadres and Party members were required to hold in their hearts the importance of the people, to respect and love them, and see the popular masses as their masters, becoming loyal servants of the people ready to devote themselves entirely to serving the popular masses.⁷⁶

The Kim Jong-un regime believed that it needed to improve living

73 "Assessment of Kim Jong-un Popular Policies," Kibum Han, written consultation (September 25, 2021). For an analysis of the major political discourse regarding people-centered policies in the North from 2012-2021, we referred to Kibum Han's written consultation.

74 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un's speech to our Party and people at the parade to commemorate the centennial of Great Leader Generalissimo Kim Il Sung's birth," *Rodong Sinmun* (April 16, 2012).

75 "Supreme Commander Kim Jong-un's speech to our Party, state and military at parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party foundation and Pyongyang mass demonstration," *Rodong Sinmun* (October 11, 2015).

76 "General Summary Report on the Central Committee's Work to the Seventh Congress of the Korean Workers' Party," *Rodong Sinmun* (May 8, 2016).

standards in order to attain the support of the people. Assertions of "people first" would not forestall growing popular discontent without some degree of improvement. In his speeches and remarks, Kim Jong-un repeatedly called the food problem and its resolution as core tasks for the improvement of popular living standards.⁷⁷ At the February 18, 2015 expanded politburo session, Kim said, "providing an abundant and happy life to the people is the dying instruction above all else and lifelong wish of the General (Kim Jong Il)··· Among the dying instructions of the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) and the General (Kim Jong Il), the instructions related to the people's food issue, food issue, and clothing issue must be implemented first."⁷⁸ In his report to the 7th Party Congress in May 2016, Kim said, "during the five-year economic strategy period, the food issue must be resolved and the people's food supply must be normalized."⁷⁹

However, as UN Security Council sanctions targeting the North have persisted, and the border has been closed due to COVID-19, the regime has failed to resolve the food situation. Kim Jong-un apologized for the failure to overcome economic difficulties. In his New Year's Address in 2017, Kim said, "my heart is heavy with concerns for how to serve the people better··· At all times, I have always been of this mind, and with regret and guilt that I have not lived up to this with my abilities I spent the previous year, and this year I will work yet harder and with my whole heart."⁸⁰ At the parade convoked on October 10, 2020 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Party foundation, Kim gave a speech in which he said, "with the trust of all people, I have led this country, but my efforts and devotion have not been enough to help the people overcome

77 "Let's accept the dying instructions of Great Comrade Kim Jong Il and turn 2012 into a year of glorious restoration, shining with laudable victories," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2012).

78 "A Korean Workers' Party Central Committee Politburo Expanded Meeting was held under the leadership of the Respected and Beloved Comrade First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party Kim Jong-un," *Rodong Sinmun* (February 19, 2015)

79 "On the decision at the Seventh Korean Workers' Party Congress made regarding the General Summary Report on the Central Committee's Work to the Seventh Congress of the Korean Workers' Party on May 8, Juche 105 (2016)," *Rodong Sinmun* (May 9, 2016).

80 "New Year's address," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 1, 2017).

the difficulties with their lives... I have received only the trust of our people, who are like the heavens and the seas, and I am so sorry that I have not been able to properly repay them."⁸¹

At the 8th Party Congress in January 2021, Kim Jong-un admitted that the Five-Year Economic Development Strategy set forth at the 7th Party Congress in 2016 had been a failure. Kim said that "the difficulties are the worst of the worst that have ever been faced, being a massive impediment to our revolution's progress... the Five-Year Economic Development Strategy was finished last year, but the targets for almost every sector were fall short," thus recognizing officially the failure of economic policy.⁸² This policy failure recognition was that of a leader seeking to directly admit problems to the people, and in doing so cultivate the image of a leader seeking their forgiveness and patience.

In 2021, the aforementioned congress was convoked to pursue economic development and improvements in popular living standards, with three plenary sessions of the Central Committee also subsequently being convoked for such a purpose. The Consultative Meeting of the Central Committee and Responsible Provincial Party Cadres held on June 7, 2021 was also convoked to discuss economic work and practical policies to stabilize the living standards of the people. However, the Kim Jong-un regime has proved unable to set out fundamental solutions to resolve the economic problems the country faces and to improve the lives of the people.

81 "Kim Jong-un, breaks down during 8,000 syllable speech, beloved southern compatriots on the path to delicious restaurants," *Joongang Ilbo* (October 10, 2020), accessed June 10, 2021, <https://news.joins.com/article/23890905>.

82 "Speech to open the Eighth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party," *Rodong Sinmun* (January 6, 2021).

V. Conclusions

This article has analyzed how Kim Jong-un regime has sought to forge a monolithic system of rule and stabilize the power of Kim Jong-un following his rise to the apex of power through elite management and popular policies. The new regime's success in creating a stable base of power for Kim Jong-un is a consequence of the policies that it has put in place. Elite policies focused on reconstructing the ruling coalition and inducing elite loyalty. Kim Jong-un purged the members of the guardianship system that his father had put in place who he did not trust. And he purged some 260 elite members of the Party, government and military between 2012 and 2016. Kim Jong-un appointed people whom had proven themselves loyal to him to high office, restructuring the ruling coalition, and creating a new basis of support for his regime that stabilized his powerbase.

What is more, Kim Jong-un restored the Korean Workers' Party to its place as the center of rule in the country. The military's influence, having expanded through Military First Politics under Kim Jong Il, saw its power curtailed. Gaining control over the military was a major task facing the Kim Jong-un regime in stabilizing its powerbase. This was because the military was both the most important base of support and the biggest potential threat to the regime. Hence, in order to induce the loyalty of the military elite, Kim Jong-un purged major military elites like Chief of General Staff Ri Yong Ho, and Minister of People's Armed Forces Hyon Yong Chol, while also frequently rotating office holders in high level military positions. Through purges and churn, the threat that the military potentially posed Kim Jong-un was substantially diminished.

From the point of view of stabilization, the regime's popular policies were also comparatively successful. Over the last decade, the Kim Jong-un regime has pursued a two-sided set of policies targeting the North Korean populace. It has provided incentives to supporters, and repression and/or punishment to opponents. The Kim Jong-un regime has articulated "people-centered" and "popular masses first" policies aimed at supporters, while those who are categorized as "hostile strata" or those hostile to the government are subject

to surveillance and repression. In the course of establishing the Korean Workers' Party as the basis of his nascent regime, Kim utilized existing systems of social control to target supporters with incentives and opponents with repression.

Further, the Kim Jong-un regime also put in place policies to firmly establish Kim Jong-un's authority and legitimacy. The new regime consciously sought to present Kim Jong-un as a successor to his grandfather through imitation, presenting him as a pro-people leader, and utilized the idea of the "Paekdu bloodline" of the Kim family. What is more, the regime pursued a people-oriented policy. Cadres and Party members were told to prize, revere and love the popular masses, consider them to be their masters, and to become their loyal servants. This "popular masses first" ideology was codified in the Party Bylaws at the 7th Party Congress in 2016. The Kim Jong-un regime said it would resolve the country's food problems in order to gain the people's support. However, as sanctions, and the COVID-19 pandemic-induced border closures have persisted, the economic crisis has deepened, and food problems have remained unresolved.

The Kim Jong-un regime's inability to resolve the food problem has presented a significant challenge. Economic crisis will inflame elite discontent and popular resentment. The regime's capacity to maintain the support of the elite and the masses will hinge on its ability to resolve the economic crisis. Further, success in the ideological control of the youth will be important in determining whether they support the regime. This is because young people who are exposed to information about the outside capitalist world could voice discontent with the North Korean system and the Kim Jong-un regime, and this could destabilize this system.

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Imagining the Audience across the Uncrossable Border: South Korean Radio Broadcasting to North Korea and the Rise of Creativity in Inter-Korean Relations

Michelle H. Choi*

Using ethnographic fieldwork data gathered at a South Korean NGO that produces radio broadcasts to North Koreans as part of "unification preparation" (*t'ongil chunbi*), I argue that radio broadcasting to North Korea and preparing for a Unified Korea both involve the professional labor of imagination and creativity that have become critical in navigating the challenges and uncertainties of inter-Korean relations. On the one hand, radio broadcasting to North Korea involves creatively imagining "the North Korean listener," a challenging process of imagining those who reside across a border that radio producers cannot physically cross. On the other hand, preparing for unification is also an imaginative project of anticipating a new Korean nation that can merge two peoples, infrastructures, and cultures, one day in the uncertain future. More than seven decades since national division on the Korean peninsula, imagination has risen to become one of the most critical capacities in managing (present and future) political and social relations between two nations and peoples that are divided across an uncrossable border.

Keywords: creativity, radio, inter-Korean relations, Korean unification, unification preparation

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I . Introduction:

The Work of Invisible Radio Waves in Inter-Korean Relations

Using ethnographic fieldwork data gathered at a South Korean NGO that produces radio broadcasts to North Koreans as part of "unification preparation" (*t'ongil chunbi*), this article argues that radio broadcasting to North Korea and preparing for a Unified Korea both involve the professional labor of imagination and creativity that have become critical in navigating the challenges and uncertainties of inter-Korean relations.¹ On the one hand, radio broadcasting to North Korea involves creatively imagining "the North Korean listener," a challenging process of imagining those who reside across a border that radio producers cannot physically cross. On the other hand, preparing for unification is also an imaginative project of anticipating a new Korean nation that can merge two peoples, infrastructures, and cultures. More than seven decades since national division on the Korean peninsula, imagination has risen to become one of the most critical capacities in managing (present and future) political and social relations between two nations and peoples that are divided across an uncrossable border.

Unbeknownst to many foreigners and even some South Koreans, radio content produced in office spaces in Seoul is crossing the heavily fortified borders between the two Koreas every day to reach the ears of North Koreans. Since the early 2000s, several non-state South Korean groups have formed to engage in the professional labor of producing radio broadcasts intended for North Korean listeners.² Founded in 2005 by a small group

1 In this article, Romanization of Korean words and names follow the McCune-Reischauer system. Also note that page numbers may not be specified for information or quotation taken from web-based sources.

2 This includes groups such as Free North Korea Radio (2004—), Unification Media Group (which brings together Open Radio for North Korea and Radio Free Chosun) (2005—), and North Korea Reform Radio (2007—). Note that the article is limited to the author's ethnographic experience in UPI and

of South Korean activists passionate about democracy, unification, and change on the Korean peninsula, UPI³ is one such media group, housed in an unassuming office building in a residential neighborhood of Seoul populated by apartments, restaurants, and schools.

At UPI, although most of the work week is spent by radio producers on their individual radio shows — such as brainstorming the week's theme, recruiting available guests, writing up the show's script, and recording and editing the segments — the weekly meeting is a chance for all the radio PDs (short for "producers") to get together and check in with each other. Since their radio broadcasts are directed to North Koreans across the border, radio PDs often have no idea how their "audience" is reacting to their shows. Unlike typical radio shows that can track daily listenership ratings or receive live feedback from listeners, UPI radio PDs work with uncertainty: Who is listening? What do they approve or disapprove of about the content that they are producing? Without direct access to their audience, it is thus up to the Radio Team to monitor each other's shows and offer constructive feedback, as they imagine what a North Korean might want or need.

In one weekly meeting in the spring of 2018, a new radio show that teaches basic Chinese was receiving positive feedback from the staff. Since North Koreans who are pondering defection will most likely have to go through China, the Radio Team thought this is a show that will likely be attractive to many North Korean listeners. Instead of ideological indoctrination about the benefits of democracy and capitalism, this new program provides practical life skills that their North Korean listeners would want to tune in for. On the other hand, there was some internal criticism over the frequent use of loan words and neologisms that their North Korean listeners would not follow. "I noted that we are using words like 'well-being' or 'bucket list' without explaining what they mean," one senior radio PD pointed out to the rest of the group. "It's fine to use them,

does not reflect the entirety of the South Korean broadcasting to the North Korea sector.

3 UPI is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of my interlocutors.

but we need to explain what they mean."

This article is based on twelve months of immersive, long-term ethnographic fieldwork research at UPI between 2017 and 2018.⁴ As an intern at UPI, I conducted participant-observations of UPI as a place of work and carried out unstructured interviews with approximately thirty employees during my time there. This was complemented by observations of many public events involving the topic of Korean unification and conversations with a number of leading experts in the field of Korean unification, such as the former Minister of Unification and Minister of Foreign Affairs and researchers at Korea Institute for National Unification and University of North Korean Studies.

On one hand, scholarship on inter-Korean relations has largely been state-centric, either through the disciplinary lens of history or political science.⁵ Over the years, several prominent issues within the domain of inter-Korean relations have attracted the bulk of scholarly interest from anthropologists, from the DMZ⁶, family reunions⁷, to defector resettlements.⁸

4 Four months of preliminary fieldwork were conducted during the summers of 2015 and 2016. This ethnographic fieldwork research has been funded by the Social Science Research Council, Harvard University's Korea Institute, Fulbright Korea, and Harvard University's Committee on General Scholarships.

5 Hak-chun Kim, *The Domestic Politics of Korean Unification: Debates on the North in the South, 1948-2008* (Seoul; Edison, NJ: Jimoondang, 2010).

6 Eleana Jean Kim, "Toward an Anthropology of Landmines: Rogue Infrastructure and Military Waste in the Korean DMZ," *Cultural Anthropology* 31 no. 2 (2016): 162-187.

7 Nan Kim-Paik, *Liminal Subjects, Liminal Nation: Reuniting Families and Mediating Reconciliation in Divided Korea* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007); Joowon Park, "Voices from War's Legacies: Reconciliation and Violence in Inter-Korean Family Reunions," *Anthropology and Humanism* 45 no. 1 (2020): 25-42.

8 Byung-Ho Chung, "Between Defector and Migrant: Identities and Strategies of North Koreans in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 32 no. 1 (2008): 1-27; Jin-Heon Jung, "The Religious-Political Aspirations of North Korean Migrants and Protestant Churches in Seoul," *Journal of Korean Religions* 7 no. 2 (2016): 123-48.

Scholars such as Kim, Cho, and Jeong⁹ and Koo¹⁰ have started to attend to South Korean civil society's important involvement in Korean unification (see also Hwang¹¹ who advocates for a non-state approach to inter-Korean relations). In particular, ethnographic approaches to inter-Korean relations hold the potential to shed new insights about how relations between the two Koreas can also occur beyond the foreign policies between neighboring nation states or the affective relations between separated family members.¹² By taking a look at how inter-Korean relations are professionally managed by institutional actors situated in particular bureaucratic roles (e.g. producing radio broadcasts, preparing for future unification), this article pushes us to take seriously the agency of South Korean social actors who are engaging those across the uncrossable border in surprisingly creative ways by harnessing the power of invisible radio waves.

On the other hand, an ethnographic approach to "radio fields"¹³ has been gaining ground in the field of anthropology of media.¹⁴ Paying critical attention to how radio continues to be produced, distributed, and consumed in different ways around the contemporary world is the

9 Hanna Kim, Heejung Cho and Bokgyo Jeong, "Social Networks and Ideological Orientation of South Korean NGOs Involved in the Unification Issues of the Korean Peninsula," *Asian Survey* 51 no. 5 (2011): 844-875.

10 Kab-Woo Koo, "Civil Society and the Unification Movement in South Korea: Issues and Challenges," *Journal of Peace and Unification* 1 no. 1 (2011): 91-126.

11 Jihwan Hwang, "The Paradox of South Korea's Unification Diplomacy: Moving Beyond a State-Centric Approach," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 23 no. 1 (2014): 49-72.

12 Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Hyun Ok Park, *The Capitalist Unconscious from Korean Unification to Transnational Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

13 Lucas Bessire, Daniel Fisher, and Faye Ginsburg, *Radio Fields: Anthropology and Wireless Sounds in the 21st Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Lucas Bessire and Daniel Fisher, "The Anthropology of Radio Fields," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 363-78.

14 Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

driving agenda of this emerging body of work. While radio has largely been interpreted within a dichotomy of either imposing globalizing, homogenizing ideologies from above that abet national or commercial interests (e.g. corporate radio) or empowering local people to have their own voices (e.g. community radio), the case of South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea is an ethnographic case that can confound such binary-thinking. UPI is at once "community radio" in its small scale and budget and its ambition to empower North Koreans who lack freedom of information; but at the same time, it is also part of the globalizing, homogenizing project to make every corner of Earth open to democracy and capitalism. Ethnographically studying South Korean radio broadcasts to North Korea is thus a timely contribution to both inter-Korean relations studies and radio scholarship.

II. Radio Broadcasting to North Korea: A Brief History

In 2017, the United Kingdom joined the ranks of South Korea, the U.S., and Japan in sending radio broadcasts to North Korea via short- and medium-wave radio frequencies. In its first broadcast in the September of 2017, the BBC shared with North Korean listeners the latest global news about the U.S. military and German politics, and an interview with Ban Ki-moon, former Secretary General of the United Nations.¹⁵ The broadcast also included local weather news of major North Korean cities from Pyongyang to Chongjin.¹⁶ As the North Korean state ramped up its nuclear and missile testing that year, the BBC took this step as part of the international community's strategy to apply more pressure to North Korea to deter its military ambitions, similar in logic to increasing economic sanctions in response to aggressive behaviors taken by North Korea. The

15 BBC, "BBC Launches Services for Ethiopia and Eritrea," September 18, 2017.

16 Yoon-young Cho, "Hwaksandoenŭn Haeoe Taebukpangsong, Yŏng BBC Hamnyut't... "Tepuk Chumin 30% Ch'ŏngch'wit'e'" (Expansion of foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea, U.K.'s BBC joins... "30% of North Korean residents listen in"), *Newsis*, October 9, 2017.

BBC had become the latest member of a growing number of foreign broadcasting stations that produce Korean-language radio broadcasts aimed at North Korean listeners: the U.S.'s Voice of America and Radio Free Asia¹⁷; Japan's Wind from the Homeland and Sea Breeze¹⁸; and South Korea's KBS Hanminjok ["Korean People"] Radio, Free North Korea Radio, Unification Media Group, North Korea Reform Radio, National Intelligence Service's Voice of the People and Echo of Hope.

In a country such as North Korea where there are severe limitations to freedom of information and media, radio is an important medium to distribute timely external information across national borders.¹⁹ Although the contemporary world is increasingly moving toward video or the Internet, radio remains an essential tool for the global political campaign to send media and information to isolated parts of the world that are disconnected from the rest of the world for political, economic, and technological reasons. The same year, the BBC expanded its radio service to not only North Korea but also Ethiopia and Eritrea.²⁰

Radio is also only one option among many other creative attempts to send information and media into North Korea, such as delivering propaganda leaflets in balloons or smuggling in USBs containing South Korean film and television.²¹ Although North Koreans are only permitted

17 In 1994, Voice of America started radio broadcasting to North Korea after the death of Kim Il-sung, and a large number of defections resulting from the famine alerted the international community about the country's poor human rights conditions; Radio Free Asia joined soon after in 1997.

18 Much of Japan's radio broadcasts are concerned with the particular issue of North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens, according to Yoon-young Cho, "Han'guk Taebukpangsong Haetpyötchöngch'aek Ihu Yumyöngmushirhwa" (South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea loses force after the Sunshine Policy), *Newsis*, October 10, 2017.

19 For a comprehensive overview of the changing media environment in North Korea, see Intermedia, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment," 2012, 5-23; and Intermedia, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 2018, 4-23.

20 BBC, "BBC Launches Services for Ethiopia and Eritrea," September 18, 2017.

21 Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets*,

to consume state-sponsored media, an increasing number of them are therefore gaining access to foreign media. Different estimates (usually based on survey research of North Korean defectors) put foreign radio listenership rates at about 10-30% of North Koreans.²²

The North Korean state is known to have protested against the BBC's broadcasting through the North Korean Embassy in London, asserting that the BBC's move is part of the imperialists' nefarious plot to infiltrate and destroy North Korean society; experts, however, believe the real reason for the North Korean state's objection is that accessing foreign media may result in undesirable "consciousness change" among its people that may lead to resistance or defection.²³ Since the mid-2000s, the North Korean state has created the "109 Group" to find and punish North Koreans who dare to consume foreign media, including not only foreign radio broadcasts but also South Korean film and television.²⁴ Punishments for accessing foreign media are known to be harsh, such as political prison camp sentences and even death.²⁵ However, the increasing willingness of authority figures to take bribes to overlook these offenses and the increasing unwillingness of North Koreans to report on each other for such behavior have created an environment in which the illicit consumption of

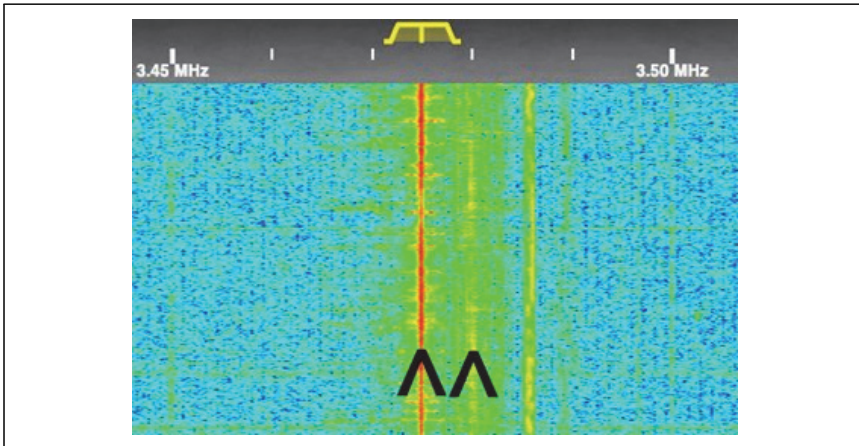
Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors (Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2015); Choe Sang-Hun, "As Floating Propaganda Irks North Korea, the South Isn't Happy Either," *New York Times*, June 11, 2020.

- 22 Intermedia, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment," 2012, 20; Intermedia, "Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics Between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea," 2018, 10.
- 23 Yoon-young Cho, "Hwaksandoenün Haeoe Taebukpangsong, Yöng BBC Hamnyut't... "Tepuk Chumin 30% Ch'öngch'wit'e'" (Expansion of foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea, U.K.'s BBC joins... "30% of North Korean residents listen in"), *Newsis*, October 9, 2017.
- 24 Robert King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," *Beyond Parallel*, May 15, 2019.
- 25 Nat Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls," *38 North*, June 9, 2017; Yoon-young Cho, "Puk Chumin, Han'guk Noraebut'ö Tütta Chömch'a Nyusü Tchokü-ro" (North Korean residents first start listening to Korean songs, then move on to the news), *Newsis*, October 11, 2017.

foreign media endures and expands.²⁶

The North Korean state is also known to engage in radio jamming (such as strategically broadcasting heavy noise on the same frequency as the South Korean stations to make them unlistenable), which in turn forces foreign radio stations to change frequencies often in response.²⁷ For instance, Williams notes that South Korean radio stations operated by the National Intelligence Service shifted their frequencies downwards by five kHz so that their broadcasts can be heard more intelligibly without the jamming by North Korean authorities. Figure 1 shows the South Korean radio station signal on the left (in a stronger, red line) and the North Korean jamming in the right (in the weaker, yellow line); Williams notes that until the frequency was changed, these two were on top of one other.

<Figure 1> Responding to radio jamming by changing frequencies



Source: Martyn Williams, "South Korea Adjusts Some Radio Frequencies to Escape Jamming," *North Korea Tech*, October 2, 2019.

26 Nat Kretchun, "The Regime Strikes Back: A New Era of North Korean Information Controls," *38 North*, June 9, 2017.

27 Martyn Williams, "South Korea Adjusts Some Radio Frequencies to Escape Jamming," *North Korea Tech*, October 2, 2019.

Outside North Korea, there are both ideological support and financial backing for radio broadcasting to North Korea for its potential in improving human rights there — namely, the right to free information²⁸ — in a country infamously ranked last in the World Press Freedom Index²⁹, an annual ranking conducted by Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters Sans Frontières*). However, there are also critical voices — such as South Korean leftists who seek friendly relations with North Korea — that see radio broadcasting to North Korea as "interfering in the internal affairs" of another sovereign nation and which should be avoided.³⁰

South Korea started its radio broadcasting to North Korea since the 1970s when the publicly funded Korean Broadcasting System (KBS)'s Social Education Radio started producing anti-communist radio broadcasts targeting North Koreans.³¹ However, South Korean state-sponsored radio broadcasting started to languish in 2000 when the first Inter-Korean Summit between the two leaders resulted in promises to avoid criticism of each other's regimes. In 2007, KBS Social Education Radio was eventually re-named KBS Hanminjok Radio and re-branded as a radio station that targets Koreans not only in North Korea, but also in Japan, China, and Russia. As KBS's role dwindled in the 2000s, several groups mostly made up of North Korean defectors and South Korean activists started their own radio stations. Many of these non-state groups — including UPI, the site of

28 According to the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

29 See "2020 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2020>. In 2020, North Korea was ranked last in 180th place, while South Korea was ranked #42.

30 Yoon-young Cho, "Hwaksandoenŭn Haeoe Taebukpangsong, Yŏng BBC Hamnyut't... "Tepuk Chumin 30% Ch'ŏngch'wit'e" " (Expansion of foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea, U.K.'s BBC joins... "30% of North Korean residents listen in"), *Newsis*, October 9, 2017.

31 Yoon-young Cho, "Han'guk Taebukpangsong Haetpyŏtchŏngch'aek Ihu Yumyŏngmushirhwa" (South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea loses force after the Sunshine Policy), *Newsis*, October 10, 2017.

my ethnographic fieldwork research — are funded by the U.S. government through intermediary institutions such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) as part of their global political campaign to spread democracy and improve human rights.³² This article thus joins the ongoing interest among scholars, journalists, activists, and governments on how foreign radio broadcasting to North Korea can contribute to the on-the-ground changes occurring in North Korea.³³

III. Crossing Borders to Reach the North Korean Listener

Radio Broadcasting to North Korea as Part of "Unification Media"

Established in the mid-2000s, UPI focuses on *t'ongilmidŏ* ("unification media") as part of the larger national project of "unification preparation" in contemporary South Korea. With a staff of approximately 25 to 30 employees, UPI's work force is divided into four teams: news, radio, video, and operations team. Using text, sound, and video, UPI engages in

32 A small part of UPI's funding comes from donations made by South Korean donors. However, the fact that most of the private sector funding for South Korean radio broadcasting to North Korea comes from the United States means that groups such as UPI are not free from the influence of changing U.S. interests in the Korean peninsula. It is also important to note that because these small non-state groups such as UPI are not under the supervision of South Korean media laws and institutions (e.g. Broadcast Act, Korean Communications Commission), the broadcasts are not subject to strict regulation; for instance, I noted during my time at UPI that music is freely used in the broadcasts with little regard for copyright laws. Finally, such small non-state groups face some criticism for lacking expertise, criticism that my interlocutors at UPI were acutely aware of and did their utmost to combat by striving to improve its "expertise" and "competitiveness" through various training initiatives for its employees.

33 See, for instance, Andrei Lankov, "Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime," *Foreign Affairs* 88 no. 6 (2009): 95–105; and Daniel Tudor and James Pearson, *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2015).

multi-media work that aims to promote change in North Korea and prepare for unification on the Korean peninsula. One of UPI's largest and oldest teams is the Radio Team. The Radio Team uses short-wave radio (radio transmission that uses short wave – as opposed to medium or long wave – frequencies) to send information about the outside world into North Korea. The goal of the Radio Team is to effect "change in the consciousness of North Korean listeners" so that they are more receptive to democratic, capitalistic futures, and prepare for unification by bridging the cultural, informational gap between North and South Koreans. The Radio Team is engaged in producing various radio shows so that UPI can broadcast three hours of radio programming to North Korea everyday: two hours of the day's programming is original content, with one hour of re-runs. On the weekends, all three hours are re-runs of the weekday programming.

So far, the South Korean government has not openly supported or funded groups such as UPI, even though transmitting medium radio waves (e.g. AM) from South Korea would drastically improve the reception quality for North Korean listeners, largely because of the political sensitivity of such content. The North Korean regime does not want outside information coming into their borders, so for the South Korean state to publicly acknowledge and actively encourage groups like UPI can be harmful to friendly inter-Korean relations. Therefore, UPI resorts to creating the radio content in their Seoul office but using foreign transmitting stations in other parts of Asia to send the short-wave radio to North Korea, thereby lowering the quality of reception for their North Korean listeners in this roundabout process.

During my time at UPI from 2017 to 2018, the transmitting station was originally located in Uzbekistan, but was then re-located to Taiwan when UPI signed a contract with another foreign radio transmitting station. "Short-wave radio frequencies, in theory, can reach anywhere on Earth by bouncing off the ionosphere³⁴ and rebounding back to Earth hundreds and

34 The ionosphere refers to the layer of the Earth's atmosphere that is capable of reflecting radio waves. Please see "Ionosphere," National Oceanic and

thousands of miles from their point of origin," states UPI in its website. But UPI also openly acknowledges that in reality, "short-wave transmissions are both weak and easily affected by atmospheric conditions, jamming from the North Korean authorities, and other uncontrollable factors," making it a highly uncertain endeavor.

Several of the senior staff at UPI monitor the broadcast every day to ensure that their radio programming is actually reaching North Korean listeners, but the reception quality is often very poor and barely intelligible to the average ears. Since UPI pays the foreign transmitting station to air their radio broadcasts, the senior staff regularly consults with the foreign transmitting station when they detect that the reception quality is lower than usual. If the reason for the poor quality is something that the foreign transmitting station can address, the foreign transmitting station does so (e.g. changing radio frequencies, implementing technical adjustments), but if the foreign transmitting station finds it to be "beyond their control" — such as unexpectedly poor atmospheric conditions or politically motivated jamming by North Korean state authorities — there is often little that can be done in response. In other words, the success of UPI radio producers' labor — i.e. reaching North Korean listeners — is subject to uncertain conditions every day, as a combination of various factors beyond UPI's control determines the daily likelihood of delivering radio waves that are strong and unhindered enough to be intelligible to the ears of North Korean listeners. Many obstacles stand in the way of UPI radio producers: from the South Korean state's hesitancy to support them, the formidably politicized and militarized borders between the two countries that cannot be physically crossed, unfavorable atmospheric conditions, to the North Korean state's jamming. In spite of the many obstacles that stand in their way, UPI radio PDs work in the hopes that these invisible radio waves are reaching the ears of some North Korean listeners. In these challenging political, technological, and atmospheric conditions of the divided Korean peninsula, short-wave radio waves are the only creative way for some South

Atmospheric Administration, accessed December 20, 2021, <https://www.swpc.noaa.gov/phenomena/ionosphere>.

Koreans to reach some North Koreans on a regular basis.

On any typical weekday afternoon, radio PDs on the third floor of UPI's offices can be found sitting outside the radio booths, wearing headphones and signaling cues to the radio personalities and guests inside. Most of the radio personalities and guests are regulars — ranging from professors, researchers, activists, students, North Korean defectors, to sometimes even celebrities — who volunteer their time and talent to UPI. The radio booths are booked throughout the day, with PDs trying to record their segments for the day's radio broadcast before the 5 p.m. afternoon deadline. Park PD is in charge of gathering the radio segments from all the PDs before sending it off as a single digital file to the radio transmitting station abroad that is paid by UPI to broadcast their radio shows to North Korea in short-wave frequency.

In the early years of UPI, the radio content was highly critical of the North Korean state. In the words of Choi *t'imjang*, one of the senior staff at UPI and leader of the Operations Team, it was "pro-South propaganda" to counter the North Korean regime's propaganda (which explains why UPI continues to be seen as "conservative" [*bosu*] in the eyes of many field professionals, in spite of its institutional aspiration to be politically neutral). However, UPI has, over time, taken a markedly different approach to change the minds and behaviors of North Koreans after UPI's senior staff reached the conclusion that North Koreans may have more trust of their radio content if it was more "objective."

I discovered that this shift toward objective content was strategically made in the wake of UPI leadership's realization that the institution cannot weather the unpredictable swings in South Korean politics between conservative and progressive administrations without increasing its "objectivity," "expertise," and "competitiveness." During my year at UPI, countless numbers of training initiatives were launched by UPI leaders to transform the new and old employees into expert media professionals who can remain relevant, whether the Blue House was occupied by Lee Myung-bak or Moon Jae-in, two recent Presidents with markedly different

approaches and priorities to inter-Korean relations. By striving to position itself as a professional media group that produces high-quality, objective media content, UPI hoped to survive in a precarious environment where small, non-state groups working on North Korean issues disappeared overnight from being on the wrong side of the conservative-progressive axis.

In lieu of blatant pro-South, anti-North propaganda-like content, UPI's Radio Team now operates under the philosophy that delivering "accurate," "informative," and "entertaining" content is the more effective approach in winning the hearts and minds of North Koreans. UPI's Radio Team has two general categories in its radio content: *Sisa* (news, current affairs) and *Kyoyang* (educational, entertaining programs). Instead of seeing the "North Korean people" as a uniform mass, the Radio Team has also been trying to strategically target different sub-groups of North Korean residents by diversifying its content, such as a radio show introducing 20s/30s life in South Korea that targets similar age groups in North Korea or a radio show teaching basic Chinese that targets those who have plans of defecting to/or have already defected to China.

Creatively Imagining the North Korean Audience

During ethnographic fieldwork at UPI, I have found that content creation for North Korean listeners is a highly creative genre of labor because radio PDs at UPI cannot directly know their North Korean listeners, their "imagined audience." An essential part of their work thus involves *imagining* what their audience will be like and *creatively* coming up with radio content that can satisfy their imagined audience. The creativity and imagination involved in audienceship was made particularly crystal clear to me during a company workshop where radio PDs were asked to create "listener profiles" of UPI's radio content. In groups of four or five, radio PDs began brainstorming who they imagine are regularly tuning into UPI's radio shows:

<Figure 2> "Listener profiles" created during a company workshop in 2018

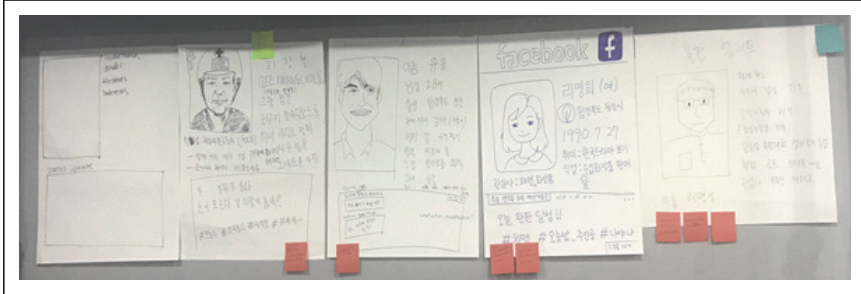


Photo taken by Author.

Myung-hee is a 27-year-old woman living in Chongjin who sells smuggled makeup products in the informal market. She enjoys watching South Korean dramas during her downtime. Radio content on the latest fashion trends could be something Myung-hee would be interested in... But Myung-sung, a 45-year-old party official living in Pyongyang, whose interests are golfing and investing, may want to hear radio shows about very different things. He might be interested in hearing about economic sanctions news or currency exchange rates...

This workshop exercise brings to light how imaginative the radio production process actually is, when their work requires a leap of faith that UPI's radio content is catering to the imagined interests and curiosities of those whom they have never (and may never) meet. On any day, it is unclear *who* will be listening to the fruits of their labor (e.g. a 25 year old single woman working in a factory and interested in South Korean fashion, or a 45 year old businessman looking for information on China?), but radio PDs continue to produce content that they hope is promoting change and preparing for unification, one radio broadcast at a time.

I argue, then, that an integral part of producing radio broadcasts for North Korean listeners has become the creative labor of *imagining the audience*. Who are they? What are their needs and desires? How will hearing

this particular radio content make them think and act differently? Considering that a number of foreign radio stations that target North Korean listeners have an investment in changing North Korea/ns (in the direction of more democracy, more human rights, more capitalism, more openness to the outside world, etc.), there is a strong interest in understanding who they are and creating content that can influence their thoughts and actions in a particular direction.

IV. Knowledge and Ignorance in Creatively Imagining the North Korean Listener

In both casual conversations with my interlocutors at UPI and industry discussions about North Korean listeners, a recurring image appears of the stereotypical North Korean listener: someone listening alone late at night around 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., "hours which are safer from security personnel visits and curious neighbors."³⁵ In response to this imagined image of the stereotypical North Korean listener covered under his sheets away from prying eyes at night, many foreign radio broadcasting stations strategically target late hours.³⁶ The stereotypical listener is also imagined to have at first randomly come across foreign radio stations while changing frequencies. North Korean radio devices must be registered with the state and technical adjustments are made by state authorities to the radio devices so that residents can only listen to state-sponsored channels. However, curious North Koreans can illicitly adjust their radio devices so that they can experiment with different frequencies. Since the 2000s, with more trade with China, there are also more short-wave radio devices entering the country through Korean-Chinese merchants.³⁷ At first, the

35 Robert King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," *Beyond Parallel*, May 15, 2019.

36 Yoon-young Cho, "Puk Chumin, Han'guk Noraebut'ō Tütta Chömch'a Nyusü Tchokü-ro" (North Korean residents first start listening to Korean songs, then move on to the news), *Newsis*, October 11, 2017.

37 *Ibid.*

imagined listener does not know which foreign radio station it is (South Korean? American? British?), but starts tuning in when he hears the familiar sounds of the Korean language. Some of them, then, turn into regular, committed listeners. According to King, "there are few casual listeners to foreign radio. Because of the danger of being caught and punished, individuals who listen to foreign radio are committed listeners who listen regularly."³⁸ In other words, the random listener is imagined to turn into a regular listener only if the radio content is engaging or useful enough to risk possible punishment.

The stereotypical image of a North Korean listener that I have described so far is vague at best and does not provide the level of specificity or detail that is useful in audienceship research. However, considering that South Korean radio producers cannot cross the political border to North Korea to meet their potential listeners, they must turn to various *indirect* sources of knowledge to improve their understanding of their target audience. In particular, talking to North Korean defectors is one of the most common methods of gaining access to North Korea/ns indirectly. However, obtaining information about North Koreans through defectors is not as simple as it may seem.

Although most (indirect) research on North Korea/ns rests on the interviews, surveys, and testimonies given by North Korean defectors, refugees, and travelers, there were recurring concerns expressed by my interlocutors at UPI that this is not the same as *directly* going into North Korea and talking to North Koreans *currently* living inside the borders of North Korea, which re-affirms the belief (or myth) that there is far superior authenticity to information gained from unmediated access to North Korea; and on the flip side, that there is some questionable quality to knowledge gained indirectly (through North Korean defectors, for instance), even though that is how most research and journalism on North Korea/ns is done.³⁹

38 Robert King, "North Koreans Want External Information, But Kim Jong-Un Seeks to Limit Access," *Beyond Parallel*, May 15, 2019.

Here, I briefly turn our attention to a 2016 survey, conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a U.S. think tank based in Washington D.C., in which thirty-six North Korean residents were included. The fact that this survey was done among North Koreans currently living in North Korea was argued to be the main merit of this study because "these opinions are *current*" (emphasis added), Myong-Hyun Go notes in a commentary about the survey titled "The Merits of Conducting Surveys Inside North Korea."⁴⁰

Go explains the reason why North Korean residents are so valued:⁴¹

"... it is rare for refugees to arrive in South Korea within weeks of escaping from North Korea. Some spend years in China, and while in

39 Note that several foreign media agencies such as the Associated Press, Kyodo News, and Xinhua News have a Pyongyang office, but it is nearly impossible for these in-country journalists to interact with ordinary North Koreans without a representative of the state present to monitor the meeting. Even though it remains highly doubtful that visiting North Korea to talk to North Koreans currently residing in North Korea necessarily yields more and/or better information, I have observed that there is still widespread anxiety about information gained indirectly through North Korean defectors who no longer live in the country. On a related note, whether or not having been to North Korea (and how many times you have been to North Korea) truly determines the quality or quantity of one's knowledge on North Korea, I would frequently hear South Korean industry professionals introduce themselves as "having been to North Korea, X number of times," or "unfortunately haven't been to North Korea" to either boost their authority (in the former case) or qualify their expert status (in the latter case).

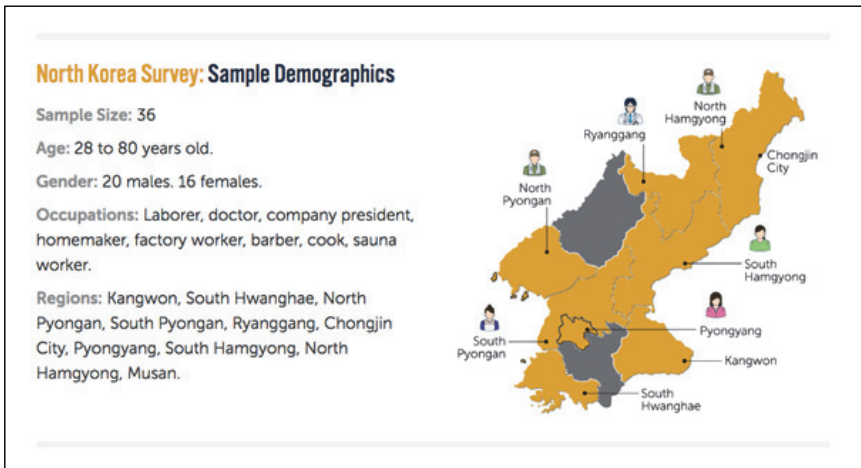
40 Myong-Hyun Go, "The Merits of Conducting Surveys Inside North Korea," *Beyond Parallel*, November 2, 2016.

41 Go acknowledges that random sampling was not possible in this survey due to the sensitive political context in North Korea; instead, CSIS had to resort to "convenience sampling" because respondents were chosen among those who had a relationship of trust with the survey administrators. Moreover, because of the dangerous nature of conducting such a survey, the sample size had to be extremely small (i.e. 36), making it far from the ideal public opinion survey that can represent North Korea as a whole. In spite of these obvious downsides, the survey — titled "A View from North Korea" — goes to validate North Korean residents as the most valued sources of "current," "direct" information on North Korea (see Figure 3).

transit, they live under constant threats of forced repatriation by the Chinese authorities. Once they arrive in South Korea their recollection of North Korea *may no longer be current and could be biased*" (emphasis added).

Considering that more than 30,000 North Korean defectors are more conveniently available for research in South Korea, the impulse to run such a survey among North Korean residents — a risky, expensive endeavor, according to interlocutors I have talked to who have been closely involved in running this survey — reveals the fetishization of "current," "direct" information from North Korea/ns, which is considered to be more authentic and authoritative.

<Figure 3> Demographic information of North Korean residents surveyed by CSIS



Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies, "A View Inside North Korea." 2016.

Moreover, knowledge gained about North Korea/ns through defectors is doubted not only because of its indirectness and outdatedness, but also because North Korean defectors are not statistically representative of the general North Korean population.⁴² In short, because the North Korean

42 For instance, Go notes that: "According to the latest statistics from South Korean Ministry of Unification, 76% of the refugees in South Korea hailed

defector population is heavily imbalanced in terms of region of origin and gender, knowledge from this statistically unrepresentative sample is therefore considered to be not fully dependable for the task of understanding North Koreans. The President of UPI once noted in a talk that he only takes half of what North Korean defectors say into account because of this very demographic unrepresentativeness. Other South Korean experts have confessed to me that they only take half of what North Korean defectors say seriously because these experts claimed that many North Korean defectors are prone to lies and exaggerations; such statements suggest that discrimination against North Korean defectors remains pervasive even among experts who have more experience interacting with North Korean defectors than the average South Korean. In other words, although North Korean defectors are often the only indirect means of gaining knowledge about North Korea/ns, many do not consider them to be a source of authoritative, definitive knowledge on North Korean listeners.

Under such challenging conditions of information gathering, the resulting audienceship research on North Korean listeners continues to be subject to doubt, in spite of the industry-wide agreement on the importance of "knowing your audience." Therefore, the task of imagining the North Korean listener remains a challenging endeavor for the South Korean radio PDs who must navigate not only knowledge but also *ignorance* about the country and people across the uncrossable border. Under such conditions of knowledge *and* ignorance, creativity becomes even more

from just two provinces in North Korea: North Hamgyong and Ryanggang, both of which border China. According to the 2008 census reported to the United Nations by North Korea, the population shares of these two provinces were only 10% and 3.1%, respectively. So there is clearly a very strong geographic bias in the refugee population. Another issue with the refugee population is the gender ratio. More than 70% of the refugees in South Korea are female, due to the fact many female North Korean refugees are victims of human trafficking rings that either snatch them on the Chinese side of the border or smuggle the women across the border to be sold into forced marriage with Chinese men."

vital in the everyday labor of producing radio shows that cater to the imagined desires and needs of "Myung-hee, a 27-year-old woman living in Chongjin who sells smuggled makeup products in the informal market" or "Myung-sung, a 45-year-old party official living in Pyongyang."

V. No Right or Best Way to Do the Job: The Creative Art of Walking in the Dark

The most basic — and also the most profound — lesson imparted to me from a year at UPI is about the very nature of unification preparation work: there is no 'right' or 'best' way to prepare for Korean unification. What is considered 'effective' and 'urgent' unification preparation work at any given point in time is, in essence, variable and uncertain. For even a single sub-field of the industry (unification media, in UPI's case), there are tens, or even hundreds, of possible actions and directions they may take in the name of preparing for unification. There is not even a single definition for "unification media," as the President of UPI admitted, making it so that there is no clear path that a group engaged in unification media must take moving forward. This ambiguity makes each day, month, and year at UPI a series of creative, self-reflexive moves to work with uncertainty at each step of the murky road that is unification preparation.

As a participant-observer, it almost seemed like each step UPI took had to be taken as if walking in the dark, with no end of the tunnel in sight. There is no universally agreed upon definition, timeline, or rubric on 'preparation' that guides their work, so that the question of productivity or efficacy (or the lack thereof) uneasily hovers over the individual, the institution, and the field. During my time at UPI, I noted that this was the case for both leadership figures and new employees at UPI. The President could never give me a definitive vision for the institution, as he had to take into consideration a broad range of ever-evolving factors. With every swing in domestic politics, change in media trends, or shift in international relations, what would constitute productive, efficacious preparatory work toward Korean unification, in turn, would have to be reworked and

reimagined. Under such macro-contexts of high uncertainty, what should UPI's short-, mid-, long-term goals be, and how would UPI measure success (or failure) at reaching those goals, the President would wonder out loud to me. New staff also struggled to know if their work was making a difference and wondered if any visible change or success would be achievable within their career span. Insecurities about their position in the institution (will my contract be renewed in the new year?), the institution's survival (will our budget be approved next year?), or the field's future (will Korean unification continue to be a relevant social issue?) only added to the uncertainties these new employees regularly experienced, which prompted a number of them to leave UPI after only a year or two.

The most revealing example of how UPI creatively manages these uncertainties of inter-Korean relations in their everyday labor may be its very office space, located in a small four-story building in the largely residential neighborhood of Mangwon-dong in Seoul. When I first set foot into UPI's office, I felt as if I had just walked into a Google office (or at least what I imagined a Google office to look like). Nowhere did I see cubicle desks or white walls, the hallmarks of office space around the world. Without any partitioned sections or private rooms, the whole floor was a large open space that I could scan in one glance. It was beautifully decorated in the "Northern European-style," a popular interior design trend in South Korea of late, with an elegant dark maple table that acted as the grounding centerpiece to the airy open floor plan. Whimsical paintings and green plants enlivened the space with color and personality. Big, panoramic windows brought in tons of natural sunlight into the space, with work counters and high top chairs inviting me to sit by them to take in the urban scenery outside. A giant hammock chair hung from the ceiling where I spotted an employee sitting cross-legged with a laptop perched on her knees. In one corner was the office kitchen with a small fridge and coffee machine, stocked with cookies and crackers, coffee pods and tea bags. Throughout the space, a number of small tables were scattered about for staff to work on their laptops or hold small meetings. A large pine wood bookshelf grabbed my attention, which was overflowing with books not just about North Korea and Korean unification, but popular novels, travel

guides, and bestseller non-fictions. Overall, the space seemed more like a trendy café that I might find all over Seoul.

I discovered that just before I had arrived in Seoul in the fall of 2017, UPI had undertaken a major renovation of its office spaces. According to UPI's President, Mr. Lee, the renovation had a clear purpose beyond aesthetic improvement: the renovation was intended to make the workplace a more collaborative, creative working space, in the spirit of the open office spaces of Facebook, Google, and Apple. His hope was that this change in office layout will improve his staff's performance and increase UPI's competitiveness. Like thousands of workplaces across Seoul, UPI's office once used to be full of cubicles, one designated for each employee. But Mr. Lee had a new vision: he wanted to overcome all the divides that disconnected his 20+ staff into different teams, ranks, and positions in order to level the office culture. He envisioned a new UPI where staff would work together without the usual hierarchies and divisions that are typical of South Korean workplaces. In his vision, no one would have designated desks or seats; they would freely roam the different floors and spontaneously generate new synergies.⁴³

Reflecting back on my year at UPI, there was a series of interesting leadership initiatives taken by the President that, at the time, I did not see as part of the same agenda. For instance: why did the recently renovated second floor of UPI look the way it did, a space that looked unlike a typical white-collar office full of cubicles? Why did UPI's President repeatedly speak out against hierarchical office culture that is the norm in South Korea and encourage collaborations across team and rank? Why did he regularly

43 The twist of this story, I soon found out, was that this office space renovation was met with a not-so-enthusiastic response by UPI staff, who were so used to having their own work cubicle. During my time at UPI, I noted that very few people, in fact, changed where they worked; almost everyone had their 'unofficial' spot where they could be found every day, much to my amusement. The President's office renovation initiative had largely fallen flat, but this was far from the end of his continuous efforts to try to improve his staff's productivity and strengthen UPI's competitiveness.

remind (or warn) his employees to not take for granted their institution's collective survival or their individual job security, even though it seemed to me that doing so could provoke avoidable anxiety? I now understand that UPI's President had been creating (or at least trying to create) the conditions for his staff to thrive in creative uncertainty because the ability to do unification preparation work is, in its essence, the ability to work creatively *with* uncertainty.⁴⁴

Wilf argues that in order to produce workers who are good improvisers thriving under creative uncertainty, there may be various efforts taken by leadership to foster this.⁴⁵ From changing the office design to instituting a move toward *chǒnmunsǒng* ("professionalism" and "expertise"), the President was committed to normalizing and naturalizing creative uncertainty as a way-of-work at UPI. Uncertainties pervading UPI — from definition of unification media to funding for next year — created a company-wide ethos that as employees, they must embrace change and professionalism with enthusiasm and creativity and see the possibility for agentive action, even when things appear so uncertain and they are only a small fish in a very, very big pond. These are the dispositions and subjectivities generated and encouraged through unification preparation work, a line of work that favors creative, hopeful, flexible, professional individuals who can thrive in uncertainties. UPI is not a workplace for someone who would be paralyzed when faced with uncertainty; it is a place where uncertainty is part of the everyday fabric and only those who can creatively work *with* it can survive. The President constantly warned his staff of disappearing peer groups that met a fate of organizational stagnation and institutional death; unlike them, UPI will need to constantly challenge itself to be better "change makers," to be more "professional," if it wants to survive into the next quarter, year, and decade.⁴⁶

44 Eitan Wilf, "The 'Cool' Organization Man: Incorporating Uncertainty from Jazz Music into the Business World," in *Modes of Uncertainty: Anthropological Cases*, ed. Limor Samimian-Darash and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 29-45.

45 *Ibid.*

VI. The Role of Creative Imagination in Uncertain Inter-Korean Relations

Radio broadcasting to North Korea (as a part of "unification media") and the larger project of unification preparation (that "unification media" is a part of) are both genres of professional labor that manage the political and social relations between two Koreas. On the one hand, radio broadcasts produced in South Korea and distributed to North Korea generate mediated sociality between producers and listeners between the two countries. On the other hand, unification preparation is a political national project in South Korea that brings South and North Koreans (in particular, those who have defected from the north) together in imaginatively building a unified and shared future nation. Here, I argue that an important overlap between radio broadcasting and unification preparation is the critical role of imagination and creativity. We have already seen how radio broadcasting across the uncrossable border by radio producers is only made possible by their creative labor of imagination, namely imagining their North Korean listeners in conditions of ignorance. Imagining the North Korean listener is, in turn, part of the larger project of unification preparation that demands South Koreans to creatively imagine a new future nation on the Korean peninsula.

UPI is one of the many South Korean "unification preparation" groups that have emerged in the course of national division, particularly in the last two decades when the democratization movements of the 1980s and 90s have opened up the political and social space for more non-state

⁴⁶ The uncertainties of UPI's work were only more highlighted further into Moon's administration, when leaflet dissemination by North Korean defector groups became the public reason for North Korea raising tensions between the two countries in 2020. In turn, there was increasing uncertainty whether the Moon administration may also block radio broadcasting work by groups such as UPI (see Chad O'Carroll, *NK News*, August 11, 2020), while a growing number of groups engaged in North Korea-related work (particularly through the lens of "North Korean human rights") became the target of the Ministry of Unification (see Ha Yoon-Ah, *Daily NK*, July 21, 2020.)

participation. These groups are represented by institutions ranging from government agencies, think tanks, NGOs, churches, to corporations that are united by the common mission of preparing South Korea for future unification with North Korea. Just as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or infectious diseases need to be prepared for in our contemporary world, Korean unification came to be regarded by these South Korean actors as a possibly catastrophic future *scenario* that demands strategic anticipation and professional preparation in the present. The field of unification preparation encompasses a broad, messy range of social actors and political ideologies in both state and non-governmental arenas, from individuals and groups with *bosu* ("conservative") to *jinbo* ("progressive") leanings; from advocates of pro-unification to anti-unification positions; from supporters of rapid unification to gradual unification. It spans groups that are fully dedicated and organized to carry out unification preparation projects to institutions that periodically engage in unification preparation initiatives and partnerships.

<Figure 4> Differences developing on the divided Korean Peninsula



Photo taken by NASA in 2014

What is ultimately involved in the project of unification preparation is the professional labor of creatively imagining a future Unified Korea. This familiar photo of the Korean peninsula at night (see Figure 4) is one of the many representations that highlight the stark differences that have developed between the two Koreas over the seven decades of division. It

also speaks to the challenge that unification preparation professionals face in *imagining* a new future Korea, a new future nation, that can bridge these differences. What will be the new flag, name, currency, or capital of this future nation? How will the different education or healthcare systems be integrated in a Unified Korea? These are only a few of the countless questions that unification preparation professionals ask themselves in their everyday labor of anticipation.

All these creative imaginations must take place even though no one, not even 'the experts,' knows when or how — or even *if* — Korean unification will take place, and there are ongoing differences of opinion on the possibility and/or desirability of Korean unification. Moreover, "unification" (*t'ongil*) in South Korea generally refers to the (future) event and process of politically, geographically re-uniting the two Koreas. However, uncertainty surrounding what this event and process actually refer to (e.g. through sudden war or gradual integration? U.S-style federation or U.N.-style confederation?) makes imagining 'it' a particularly confusing and divisive matter, even among experts and professionals. In other words, every time the word *t'ongil* is invoked by two individuals or groups, it is highly possible that they are referring to different notions. Even though *t'ongil* is the very concept unifying these broad range of actors and activities, it is important to acknowledge the diversities and divergences within this shared ideological, professional universe that make the labor of creative imagination extremely challenging.⁴⁷

As UPI radio producers prepare for unification by sending radio broadcasts to North Korea, they are engaged in a double effort of imagination: imagining the North Korean listener and imagining a Unified Korea. This article thus brings our attention to the central role of

⁴⁷ The concept of "unification" acts as a unifying force because it is inter-discursive across different spaces and among different actors. At the same time, the conceptualization can vary enormously among different users and speakers. This is what makes unification a "cultural" concept in how it is sociolinguistically differentiated and unevenly distributed across the population (see Silverstein 2004).

imagination and creativity in managing uncertain inter-Korean relations, more than seven decades since national division on the Korean peninsula. The former Minister of Unification Cho Myoung Gyon (2017-2019) noted in his email inauguration address on July 4th 2017 that "the beauty of unification work is building an unknown world," likening the Ministry of Unification to a startup that traffics in uncertainty and creativity.⁴⁸ Cho suggests that the rewarding — and also the challenging — part of working in the field of unification is the task of trying to forge a future for the Korean peninsula that is complicated by so many unknowns, variables, and uncertainties. In a similar vein, an interlocutor during fieldwork described unification preparation using the four-character Chinese expression 前人未踏. By calling it *chŏninmidabŏi kil* ("a road never walked before"), he mused on the commitment and creativity needed to march forward when there are no easy models and answers to turn to. In other words, I found that unification preparation is experienced by participants to be an unprecedented task of creative imagination. Even though historical lessons from Germany and elsewhere are considered to be informative, I would often hear of the distinctiveness of the Korean case and the unique difficulties facing ahead. "If unifying East and West Germany was like mixing seawater and freshwater, unifying the two Koreas will be like mixing oil and water," said the same interlocutor to stress how difficult the future process will be and how important the role of imagination and creativity are to navigate uncharted territory.

48 Yonhap News, "Chomyŏnggyun, Not'ai Paekp'aek Ch'öt Ch'ulgŏn, "Tongilbunŏn Pench'ŏgiŏp"" (Cho Myoung Gyon, first day of work without wearing a tie and carrying a backpack, "Ministry of Unification is like a start-up"), July 4, 2017.

<Figure 5> Creativity in unification work



Former Minister of Unification Cho Myoung Gyon (2017~2019): "The beauty of unification work is building an unknown world." Taken from Ministry of Unification's Facebook page.

In fact, I witnessed during fieldwork countless classroom activities, workshop sessions, or sponsored competitions that are designed to encourage young South Koreans to use their "creativity" and "imagination" to anticipate a Unified Korea. A case in point is the Center for Unified Future of Korea (*hanbando t'ongil mirae sent'ŏ*) that opened up in late 2014 by the Ministry of Unification near the border with North Korea in Yeoncheon county. This Center is designed to produce a theme park-like environment where young visitors — mostly elementary, middle, and high school students on school field trips — can start imagining a Unified Korea. For instance, young visitors are invited to use digital technology to experience what it would be like to travel to the northern half of the peninsula: when visitors stand in front of the green screen, they can see themselves on the screen on the North Korean side of the border (see Figure 6). Through the

creative use of digital technologies, young South Koreans are given the chance to imagine a different future in which movement across the inter-Korean borders becomes possible in their lifetime. And in 2017, the Ministry of Unification hosted the "Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition" that invited university students to creatively imagine business plans for a Unified Korea (see Figure 7). From a plan to set up vending machines that dispense essential medications so that more Koreans in the north will have access to basic healthcare to a proposal to create a smartphone application that will help displaced people and their descendants locate their old hometowns, the competition encouraged a broad range of creative thinking about what kinds of business services and goods will be in demand in a Unified Korea.

<Figure 6> The Center for Unified Future of Korea that opened in 2014



Photos from the websites of the Government of Yeoncheon and the Center for Unified Future of Korea.⁴⁹

49 For reference, please see: "Attraction Spots in Yeoncheon," Yeoncheon Government, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.yeoncheon.go.kr/tour/selectTourCntntsWebView.do?tourNo=412&key=4762> and "Center for Unified Korean Future," Ministry of Unification, accessed November 11, 2021, <http://unifuture.unikorea.go.kr/>.

<Figure 7> "Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition" in 2017



Ministry of Unification poster advertising the 2017 "Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition":
What will you do in a Unified Korea?

In other words, "creativity" and "imagination" have emerged as *the* most critical capacities that are encouraged by field professionals in the project of unification preparation in contemporary South Korea. I argue that creativity and imagination have become the major *t'ongil yŏngyang* (i.e. "unification capacity") promoted by field professionals in their engagement with the general public. *Yŏngyang*, or capacity, is the strength or ability to successfully, effectively carry out a given task. Again and again, I would hear that the ultimate goal of unification preparation work is to strengthen the "unification capacity" of South Korean society so that South Koreans can manage Korean unification as a future event and process that may one day change the very fabric of political-economic, socio-cultural life on the Korean peninsula. And what these field professionals anticipate is that individuals who are capacitated with "imagination" and "creativity" will be the ones to thrive in a Unified Korea.

Why were "creativity" and "imagination" constantly on the lips of field professionals? To some, it may seem that Korean unification is not a future scenario that even demands much creativity and imagination, considering that many major aspects of the future scenario are cautiously left outside of realm of creative imagination in the politically fraught 'post-Cold War' environment of South Korea that continues to enforce the National Security Law, the anti-communist law enforced since 1948 that severely limits ideological freedom in South Korea. In fact, the assumption that Korean unification is based on (abrupt or gradual) spatial integration that will lead to ward the (sudden or eventual) formation of a single nation, based on 'universal,' 'progressive' ideologies of democracy and capitalism, is hardly questioned in both official rhetoric and informal practice in South Korea.

In spite of these caveats, it is "creativity" and "imagination" that have emerged as powerful professional tools to engage young South Koreans with Korean unification. From the Center for Unified Future of Korea to a Unification Entrepreneurship Idea Competition, what all these venues and mediums nurture and reward is creative thinking and action in imagining what is a highly uncertain future scenario of Korean unification and building an imaginative future nation commonly referred to as "Unified Korea" (*t'ongirhan'guk*). Creative exercises in the futurological building of *T'ongirhan'guk* — "an unknown world," in the words of the former Minister of Unification — involve anticipating future problems and solutions, envisioning alternative sites and icons, and imagining new jobs and businesses.

As a matter of fact, "creativity" and "imagination" have become panacea capacities that are being worshipped in a wide range of domains in South Korea, not only in the field of unification preparation. As Wilf notes:

"Creativity has become a panacea that promises success in various domains and at various levels of social reality, and hence creativity has also become the focus of managerial theories, self-help books, and experts

whose goal is to help individuals, firms, cities, and nation-states harness it as a resource for boosting productivity and creating value."⁵⁰

This is certainly the case in South Korea, where creativity has sparked heated discussions among government officials, HR experts, mothers, and teachers on why South Koreans do not have enough of 'it' and how to promote 'it' in school classrooms and company workshops. If the former Park Geun-hye administration's major slogan for inter-Korean policy was "unification preparation,"⁵¹ her central model in economic policy was "creative economy."

On the one hand, scholars of Korea have astutely noted the rise of creativity in post-IMF neoliberal South Korea as the capacity that new South Korean citizens must be armed with to survive in these new times.⁵² On the other hand, anthropologists such as Gershon⁵³ and Wilf⁵⁴ have pointed out that the "ascendance of creativity cannot be set apart from the rise of a 'neoliberal agency' that requires subjects to imagine and fashion their own future by engaging with risk and making decisions under conditions of increased uncertainty."⁵⁵ In other words, neoliberal conditions of precarity can create the backdrop for the ascendance of creativity as the panacea capacity in engaging with the uncertain future, whereby individuals are asked to be responsible for managing their own future without the help of states or corporations. A highly uncertain future

50 Eitan Wilf, "Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 406.

51 After taking office, Park soon established the new "Presidential Committee on Unification Preparation" (PCUP) in 2014, bringing together state and non-state leaders to prepare the nation for the possibility of Korean unification.

52 In-Soo Choe, "Creativity: A Sudden Rising Star in Korea," in *The International Handbook of Creativity*, eds. James Kaufman and Robert Sternberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 395-420.

53 Illana Gershon, "Neoliberal Agency," *Current Anthropology* 52 no. 4 (2011): 537-555.

54 Eitan Wilf, *Creativity on Demand: The Dilemmas of Innovation in an Accelerated Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

55 Eitan Wilf, "Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 407.

scenario such as Korean unification and a highly unpredictable geopolitical context such as inter-Korean relations, then, offers a highly fertile ground for creativity to ascend as the panacea capacity and explains why it has come to be embraced and promoted by field professionals not only in their own work, but also for the young generation.

VII. Looking Forward: The Future of Radio Broadcasting to North Korea

Radio broadcasting to North Korea continues to be a major part of UPI's work in unification media, but there are ongoing uncertainties over whether radio will remain as the most effective or feasible platform for engaging North Korea/ns moving forward into the future. For instance, if relations between the two Koreas improve to the point that free movement of people across the DMZ becomes possible, UPI's President dreams of opening a second headquarters in Pyongyang, which will in turn entail a whole new set of goals and projects that may make radio broadcasts irrelevant or done completely differently. As the contemporary world increasingly gravitates toward video for information and entertainment (e.g. television, YouTube), one of UPI's institutional priorities in recent years has been to increase its video production staff. In particular, if the political and technological environment on the Korean peninsula changes so that satellite television to North Korea becomes possible, UPI's President is considering registering UPI as a Television "PP" (program provider) in South Korea and shifting UPI's weight from radio to video production entirely. However, the President remains hesitant because he cannot possibly predict how the media environment in North Korea will change in the next month or year or decade, an uncertain future that hinges on the North Korean regime's shifting stances and policies concerning the control of media access of its people. In the meantime, unless the media environment in North Korea changes such that ordinary North Koreans have access to unrestricted Internet connections or satellite television devices, there is little rationale for UPI to invest more man-hours to create

video content that North Koreans cannot view. For now, UPI's video content is uploaded to UPI's website and YouTube channel, in the hopes that North Korean foreign laborers, exchange students, and diplomat officers can secretly view them during their time abroad.

Finally, as of 2018, most of UPI's annual operational budget to carry out radio broadcasting to North Korea comes from U.S. groups that have vested interests in the spread of pro-American democracy and capitalism to North Korea. However, there is sobering recognition among radio PDs at UPI that this funding situation may all change if North Korea no longer becomes a priority status for the U.S.'s national security. Much to their dismay, radio broadcasting to North Korea may suddenly become impossible due to lack of funding. Among UPI's leadership and staff, I observed widespread anxiety about whether UPI will continue to be funded by the U.S., or if a new administration in the U.S. may mean the end of funding for UPI. In fact, my interlocutors' concerns over the new Trump administration turned out to be true when there was news coming out of Washington that Trump wanted to cut funding to groups such as NED.⁵⁶

This article has explored what invisible radio waves sent across the borders can reveal about the relations between two nations that remain precariously mired between peace and war. The challenges and uncertainties of inter-Korean relations can only be concretely experienced by social actors situated in particular institutions and roles. Radio PDs at UPI are at the frontlines of managing the on-the-ground realities of inter-Korean relations in their everyday labor of media production and unification preparation. In this article, I have explained how creativity has risen to become one of the most critical capacities that are valued in their line of work. In managing relations between two nations that are considered challenging and unpredictable even by the most seasoned experts, imagination comes to the rescue.

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56 Josh Rogin, "The Trump Administration Wants to Dismantle Ronald Reagan's 'Infrastructure of Democracy,'" *Washington Post*, March 4, 2018.

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North Korean Political Thinking as a Reflection of Regime Survival Strategy

Er-Win Tan and Hyun Chung Yoo*

The ascension of Kim Jong-un to the leadership of North Korea signifies the emergence of a unique political entity: a Communist regime led by, what is in effect, a hereditary monarchy. With the transition from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il in 1994, and from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong-un in 2011, the political philosophical outlook of the North Korean state has evolved in response to the leadership's identification of the challenges to its rule of the country. This is reflected in the adoption of *Juche* by Kim Il Sung, of *Songgum* as adopted by Kim Jong Il, and of *Byungjin* as adopted by Kim Jong-un. This paper will examine how these respective political philosophies may be seen as a reflection of the policy priorities of the North Korean state in its efforts to retain power amidst growing isolation and pressure from the international community.

Keywords: Juche, Songun, Byungjin, North Korea, Ideology

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I . Introduction

The ascension of Kim Jong-un to the helm of the leadership in North Korean state signifies the emergence of a unique political entity: a regime that, whilst espousing an ostensibly Communist ideology, is also emerging as a hereditary monarchy insofar as the system of political leadership succession is concerned. With the transition from Kim Il-Sung to Kim Jong-Il in 1994, and from Kim Jong-Il to Kim Jong-un in 2011, the political philosophical outlook of the North Korean state has evolved in response to the leadership's identification of the challenges to its rule of the country. This is reflected in the adoption of 주체 (*Juche*) or "Self-Reliance" by Kim Il-Sung, of 선군 (*Songun*) or "Military First," by Kim Jong-Il, and of 병진 (*Byungjin*) or "Parallel Track" adopted by Kim Jong-un.¹

Although other scholars have expounded on the ideological underpinnings of the successive generations of the Kim Family, these research tracts were published prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a backdrop was characterized by fairly predictable geostrategic assumptions for the Kim Family: continued hostility from the US, Beijing's deliberate turning of a blind eye to cross-border trade, and a veneer of civility in Sino-US relations that masked their underlying tensions. More recent developments have likely highlighted to the Kim Family the need to revisit the ideological assumptions of their rule. In particular, the convergent impact of the economic slowdown and diplomatic isolation that has resulted from North Korea's closure of its borders (including with China) to curb the spread of COVID-19 and the

1 Briefly, *Juche* reflected the efforts by Kim Il Sung to achieve autarky and self-reliance for North Korea, whilst attempting to reduce his regime's reliance on outside powers – in order words, China and the USSR – for regime survival. Kim Jong Il's *Songun* was marked by the privileged status of senior members of the North Korean military establishment. Under Kim Jong-un, *Byungjin* envisages the parallel development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program alongside efforts to revitalize the economy. The tenets of these stages in the evolution of North Korean political philosophy will be examined in more detail in the subsequent sections of this manuscript.

broader backdrop of escalating Sino-US antagonism, have likely underscored to the Kim Family the need to walk a fine line in avoiding excessive over-reliance on China's economic largesse on the one hand, and the continued threat of a US-initiated war of regime change on the other.

This analysis will accordingly be presented in the following five sections, beginning with a discussion of the historical backdrop that has led to the blend of paranoia, ethnic nationalism and fears for regime survival that have shaped the succeeding generations of the Kim family in Pyongyang. The second section will in turn review how these factors were reflected amidst the evolution of the North Korean Government's political ideology in the form of the adoption of the *Juche* doctrine under Kim Il-Sung. The third section will examine how Kim Jong-Il added his own ideological spin to *Juche*, beginning with his efforts during the 1970s to elevate himself to the status of his father's successor, as well as in the younger Kim's response to North Korea's increasing isolation in the post-Cold War world with the adoption of the *Songun* doctrine. The fourth section will bring the development of North Korean governing ideology to the present day by examining the factors that have led to the present Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, adopting the *Byungjin* doctrine since his formal succession to power in 2012. The fifth, concluding section will consider the likely impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the calculations of the North Korean leadership, based not only on the likelihood that the virus had entered North Korea, but also in further heightening Sino-US tensions, thence further complicating the North Korean leadership's attempts to maintain a balancing act in managing relations with Beijing and Washington.

II. Contextualizing the North Korean View of the World

In reflecting the personality cult that has come to surround the DPRK's Founding Father, Kim Il-Sung, and his descendants, a useful starting point is to consider the geographical and historical backdrop that framed Kim Il-Sung's early years. Particularly salient is the North Korean state's longstanding wariness of foreign powers that have sought to exercise their machinations against the Korean nationalist aspirations for a unified nation-state.² The Japanese surrender to the Allied Powers in August 1945 created a power vacuum on the Korean Peninsula that was exploited by the USSR and US.³ Having fled to the USSR in 1940 to continue his anti-Japanese struggle from a guerrilla camp in the vicinity of Khabarovsk, Kim Il-Sung was seen by his Soviet patrons as a puppet who could lead a pro-Soviet puppet regime on the Korean Peninsula.⁴ Concurrently, the Soviet invasion of Japanese-occupied Manchuria and Korea, along with the unexpected rapidity of the Japanese surrender, left the US unprepared for demarcating the post-war boundaries of Northeast Asia. Amidst increasing US wariness of Stalin's seizure of large tracts of Central and Eastern Europe, the Truman Administration was anxious to avoid Soviet imposition of a puppet state following the USSR's late entry into the war against Japan in August 1945.⁵ With no US forces capable of reaching the Korean Peninsula in time to present Stalin with the *fait accompli* of a US military presence, the Truman Administration tasked two Pentagon officers, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel – neither of whom had any background in Korean Peninsula affairs⁶ – to draw a demarcation line that

2 Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2000), 149-50.

3 Vasilii Lebedev, "War and peace in liberated North Korea: Soviet military administration and the creation of North Korean police force in 1945," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2021).

4 Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 72.

5 Alonzo L. Hamby, "Harry S. Truman: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia Miller Center, accessed December 17, 202, <https://millercenter.org/president/truman/foreign-affairs>.

separated the Korean Peninsula into US and Soviet zones of occupation. Such an action was undertaken without consultation with Korean nationalists in exile,⁷ or without reviewing past foreign geostrategic interests in the Korean Peninsula. During the late 19th century, Japan had previously proposed to Tsarist Russia the 38th Parallel as a dividing line between their respective spheres of influence.⁸ Although there is no evidence to suggest that Rusk and Bonesteel were aware of this previous proposal to divide the Korean Peninsula, Don Oberdorfer speculated that their proposed division of the Korean Peninsula may have been seen by the USSR as an endorsement of a Soviet sphere of influence in the northern half of the peninsula.⁹

Furthermore, Kim Il-Sung saw the importance of exploiting Korean conceptions of social hierarchy¹⁰ to consolidate his position of power against his rivals in Pyongyang, in particular through the promulgation of a personality cult surrounding himself and his line as destined to rule over a unified Korea.¹¹ This was combined with emphasis of the Kim Family's martial credentials in defending the Korean nation from foreign aggressors, beginning with claims that Kim Il-Sung's great-grandfather had led a force of Koreans to repel an intruding US ship, the *USS Sherman*, in 1866.¹² A similar pattern of state-orchestrated aggrandizement of Kim

6 Mark Barry, "The U.S. and the 1945 Division of Korea," *NK News*, February 12, 2012, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2012/02/the-u-s-and-the-1945-division-of-korea/>.

7 Chung-Min Lee, *The Hermit King: The Dangerous Game of Kim Jong-un* (New York: All Points Books, 2019), 137-38.

8 Se-Hyun Ahn, "Russia's Great Game Stratagem toward the Korean Peninsula Revisited: Lessons from the Failure of Imperial Russia," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 26, no. 2 (2019): 64-65.

9 Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 5.

10 Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2006), 193.

11 Brian Reynolds Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How The Koreans See Themselves, And Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 75-113.

12 Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Tactics*

Il-Sung's martial credentials framed the North Korean Founding Father's activities of anti-Japanese resistance, even if such an account of history conveniently omits the role of other Korean nationalists in fighting Japanese rule.¹³ Likewise, North Korean state media went to great lengths to underscore Kim Il-Sung's martial credentials in fighting the US to a standstill during the Korean War, even though such an account neglects to mention that it was China's deployment of a million and a half troops into North Korea that saved Kim Il-Sung's regime from being toppled by McArthur's counter-invasion of North Korea in 1950.¹⁴

A further noteworthy characteristic of the North Korean state's worldview is that of ethnic nationalism. In attempting to suppress Korean nationalism and consolidate control, the Japanese colonial government had attempted to claim that Koreans and Japanese were of the same ethnic stock.¹⁵ The resulting backlash was reflected by publication of *독사신론 (Doksa Sillon)*, or *A New Reading of History*, in 1908 by the Korean nationalist historian Sin Chaeho, who portrayed the Korean people as *단일민족 (Danil Minjok)*: a unique, pure-blooded race.¹⁶ In turn, the North Korean propaganda machine has exploited this backdrop to further establish its leadership credentials. By portraying the Confucian-educated class of Yangban scholars of the Joseon Dynasty as decadent and corrupt, the North Korean propaganda machine was able to seize on a suitable scapegoat that could be blamed for the downfall of the Korean nation-state. Conversely, North Korean state media has consistently portrayed Kim Il-Sung and his line as exemplifying the characteristics of leadership that is not only the spiritual heir to *Tangun*, but which also embodies the blend of sageship, martial prowess, and benevolence to the people, as befitting an almost messianic personality capable of holding the Korean people together

(Washington: United States Institute of Peace 1999), 32.

13 Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, 31-78.

14 Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, 88-89.

15 Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 26-27.

16 Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

through sheer force of will.¹⁷ Furthermore, by contrasting such a portrayal of the North Korean state as a manifestation of the Korean nation with propaganda portrayals of the 'ideological contamination' of the US-occupied capitalist South,¹⁸ the Kim Il-Sung regime further sought to elevate itself above the ROK in seeking the status of national legitimacy over the sovereignty of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁹ Faced with the affluence of the contemporary ROK, North Korean state media has all the more reason to ramp up its propaganda machine in portraying the DPRK as the 'legitimate' Korea.²⁰

III. Kim Il-Sung Introduces *Juche*

Taken in sum, the impact of these factors on the political calculations of the North Korean leadership is evident in the nature of the governing philosophies that Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-Un espoused at critical points of their respective efforts to consolidate their succession to power. Kim Il-Sung's speech on 28 December 1955, formally known in North Korea as "*On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work*," is generally considered to mark the formal unveiling of the *Juche* doctrine.²¹

The timing of the speech underscores the nature of the challenges Kim

17 Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 104-06.

18 Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, 100-07.

19 Han S. Park, 'North Korean Perceptions of Self and Others: Implications for Policy Choices,' *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 4 (2000).

20 Andrei Lankov, "N Korea: Tuning into the 'hermit kingdom,'" *Al-Jazeera*, Jun. 10, 2014, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/6/10/n-korea-tuning-into-the-hermit-kingdom>.

21 Il-Sung Kim, *Sasangsa-eob-eseo gyojojuiwa hyeongsigjuileul toechihago jucheul hwaglibhalde daehayeo*, 1955.12.28. [*On eradicating doctrines and formalism in thought business and establishing subjects*, 1955.12.28] in Kim Il-sung's Book 9. Pyongyang: chulpansa [Pyongyang: Joseon Publishing House, reprinted in 1980].

Il-Sung faced in attempting to consolidate his rule over North Korea. The Korean War had demonstrated the extent to which Kim was dependent on China and the USSR for the survival of his regime. It had been the delivery of Soviet military aid and the promise of Chinese military support (including China's release of several thousand ethnic Koreans from its ranks to form the cadre of Kim Il-Sung's forces)²² that had led to Kim's calculation that an invasion of the ROK in June 1950 could have succeeded. Likewise, it had been the entry of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the clandestine deployment of Soviet pilots to operate MIG-15 fighters that had saved Kim's regime from McArthur's counter-invasion of North Korea in 1950.²³

It is against this backdrop that Suh Dae-Sook suggests that Kim Il-Sung introduced *Juche* as an ideological counterweight to Chinese and Soviet influence in North Korean politics, whilst simultaneously imposing his self-identity onto the Workers' Party of Korea.²⁴ Much like the factionalism that Stalin faced in securing power for himself following the death of Lenin in 1924, Kim Il-Sung faced internal challengers to his ambitions to consolidate power, all the more so after 1953. Given that Kim Il-Sung's initiation of the invasion of the South in 1950 had failed to unify the Peninsula under his control but had instead led to a stalemate following the 1953 Armistice Agreement, it may be presumed that Kim was wary that his rivals could challenge his leadership credentials by harping on how his costly failure to unify the country had instead nearly led to the regime's collapse.²⁵

Among these rivals was Pak Hon-Yong, who, in 1925, had been closely involved in founding the Korean Communist Party.²⁶ Particularly

22 Allan R. Millet, *The War for Korea, 1945-1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas), 243-45.

23 Blaine Harden, *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot: The True Story About The Tyrant Who Created North Korea And The Young Lieutenant Who Stole His Way To Freedom* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2016), 101-05.

24 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 142-57.

25 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 123-26.

uncomfortable for Kim was the fact that, in the aftermath of Japan's surrender, the North Korean Communists had initially pledged allegiance to Pak.²⁷ Furthermore, amidst increasing disillusionment with Kim's handling of the Korean War, Yu Sung-Yop, one of Pak's lieutenants, had attempted to stage a coup against Kim in 1952.²⁸ Likewise, the leader of the Chinese-backed Yan'an faction, Kim Tu-Bong, was seen as a potential challenger to Kim Il-Sung's resolve to place himself at the top of the North Korean political hierarchy; it should be recalled that at the First Session of the Central Committee in August 1946, it had been Kim Tu-Bong, not Kim Il-Sung, who had been elected Chairman of the Korean Workers' Party.

This move was opposed by Kim Il-Sung, who argued that the Korean War had already demonstrated which members of the Korean Workers' Party had proven their loyalist credentials. If Kim Il-Sung's emulation of Stalin is anything to go by, it may be presumed that Kim saw Ho as a North Korean Trotsky whose precursor move to increase power at Kim's expense constituted a long-term threat. Moreover, the process of Destalinization in the USSR following Stalin's death in 1953 likely added to Kim Il-Sung's urgency of imprinting his own ideological signature onto North Korean politics. Whilst Stalin's brutality and the KGB enabled the late Soviet leader to rule through intimidation and terror during his lifetime, the resulting animosity towards Stalin's personality cult, manifesting itself amidst post-1953 Destalinization, underscored for Kim the need to assuredly eliminate any competing school of thought or political faction that could posthumously challenge his own brand of authoritarian power.²⁹

26 Il-Sung Kim, *Joseon lodongdang je 3 cha daehoeseo han jung-ang-wiwonhoe sa-eob chonghwabogo*, 1956.4.23 [Report on the Project of the Central Committee at the 3rd Conference of the Workers' Party of Korea, 1956.4.23] Pyongyang: chulpansa [Pyongyang: Joseon Publishing House, 1980].

27 Il-Sung Kim, *Joseon lodongdang je 3 cha daehoeseo han jung-ang-wiwonhoe sa-eob chonghwabogo*.

28 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 129-30.

29 Kim, *Sasangsa-eob-eseo gyojojuuiwa hyeongsigjuuleul toechihago jucheul hwaglibhalde daehaye*.

Such a backdrop thus underscores Kim Il-Sung's attempts to consolidate a domestic power base whose loyalty to him would be unquestioned. Kim's 1955 speech placed particular emphasis on criticizing Political Committee members whose writings marked them as being seen as too close to the USSR or China.³⁰ Concurrently, Kim's speech called for a more distinctly North Korean brand of Socialist governance to meet the objective of the "Korea revolution ... the subject of our party's ideological work, all of which must be made to serve its interests."³¹ Such a development, by implicitly distancing the guiding ideology of the Korean Workers' Party from the influence of the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, underscored Kim Il-Sung's resolve to forge a uniquely Korean brand of socialism that, being grounded in Korean nationalism, would allow him to credibly attack his pro-Beijing and pro-Soviet rivals as being 'insufficiently committed' to advancing the cause of *Danil Minjok* (even if Kim's underlying objective behind such nationalist rhetoric was to ensure his own primacy in the hierarchy of North Korean politics).

Kim Il-Sung's interest in cultivating a uniquely Korean brand of socialist thought that appealed to the North Korean masses was further reflected in his 1955 speech's emphasis on introducing self-interest into three spheres of the DPRK's model of governance: *자주* (*Chaju*) or independence in political affairs; *자립* (*Charip*) or economic self-sustenance, and *자위* (*Chawi*) or military self-defence.³² Yet, given the geopolitical reality of North Korea – the lesser-populated half of the divided Korean Peninsula, facing the US-backed ROK – the uncomfortable reality for Kim Il-Sung was that he had little choice but to rely on Moscow and Beijing for his regime's survival. To this end, it is notable that Kim Il-Sung's introduction of *Juche* marked a selective application of some of the founding principles of Marxist-Leninist thought as a means of subtly

30 Kim, *sangsa-eob-eseo gyojojuuiwa hyeongsiguuileul toechihago jucheul hwaglibhalde daehayeo*.

31 Kim, cited in Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth* (Busan: Sthele Press, 2015), 49.

32 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 305-09.

reducing North Korea's ideological dependence on the USSR and China whilst symbolically proclaiming its loyalty to the socialist camp.³³ Such a strategy thence enabled the North Korean leader to play the Communist superpowers against each other amidst the increasing strains in relations between Beijing and Moscow, whilst simultaneously pressuring the Communist superpowers to compete against each other for more influence in Pyongyang through trade concessions and deliveries of military hardware to North Korea.

Concurrent to this, and presumably cognizant of the masses' yearning for unification with the southern half of the country and separated family members, the same speech made frequent references to 민족 (*Minjok*), or the notion of an ethnically pure Korean people: "Only when we educate our people in the history and tradition of their own struggle can we stimulate their national pride and rouse the broad mass of people to revolutionary struggle."³⁴ Finally, reflecting Kim's continued ambition to unify the country under his rule, the second half of his 1955 speech was focused on projecting a positive image of North Korea to the ROK, presumably in the hope that this would incite an uprising against Rhee Syngman's rule.³⁵ Closely intertwining the aforementioned tenets of Juche is the notion of Kim Il-Sung as 수령, or *Suryong*. Although the term means "Faction Leader" in the ROK, it is the highest level of honorific in North Korea, a title reserved only for Kim Il-Sung (but not his successors), and likely underscored Kim Il-Sung's resolve to place himself atop the North Korean political hierarchy.³⁶

Whilst these actions marked Kim Il-Sung's resolve to center the North Korean political structure around himself and his family, it also aroused the concerns of the Chinese and Soviet-backed factions in Pyongyang which, although having earlier supported Kim Il-Sung's rise to power as

33 Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth*, 51-55.

34 Kim, cited in Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth*, 49.

35 Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 41.

36 Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 115.

an alliance of convenience,³⁷ now feared being displaced by the increasing centralization of power in Kim Il-Sung's hands. Furthermore, James Person has noted the extent to which both the USSR and PRC sought to meddle in North Korean internal affairs. Not only was the Soviet side openly disdainful of Kim Il-Sung's claims to represent an independent North Korean state, the USSR saw North Korea as a small entity that could be intimidated into granting increased mining concessions to Soviet interests.³⁸ Moreover, Kim Il-Sung believed that Mao Zedong sought to reduce North Korea into a modern-day vassal-state of China.³⁹ Matters came to a head during what has become known as the 1956 August Faction Incident, which is also referred to officially in Pyongyang circles as "The Second Arduous March."⁴⁰ Amidst the process of Destalinization, Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev invited Kim Il-Sung to Moscow, in a bid to bring the North Korean leader in line with the USSR's new ideological line.

In Kim's absence, Pak Chang-Ok and Choe Chang-Ik, the respective leaders of the Soviet and Yan'an Factions in Pyongyang at the time, plotted to use the forthcoming plenum of the Central Committee as an opportunity to attack Kim's leadership credentials and his failure to bring about the unification of the Korean Peninsula.⁴¹ Moreover, seeking to mobilize North Korea for a renewed effort to unify the Peninsula under his rule, Kim exploited the 1960 Sino-Soviet Split by alternating between favouring ties

37 Tertitsky, 'A history of North Korea's party congresses – what should we expect?,' *Guardian*, May 5, 2016, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/05/north-korea-workers-party-congress-kim-jong-un-what-to-expect>.

38 James F. Person, 'Narrating North Korean History through Socialist Bloc Archives: Opportunities and Pitfalls,' *Journal of Korean Studies* 26, no. 2 (2021): 244-47.

39 Person, 'Narrating North Korean History through Socialist Bloc Archives,' 244-47.

40 Jae-Jung Suh, *Origins of North Korea's Juche: Colonialism, War, and Development* (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 97.

41 David Hall, 'The 1956 August Plenum Incident: An Historiographical Analysis,' *North Korea Review* 16, no. 2 (2020): 101-110.

with Beijing and Moscow,⁴² in a bid to persuade the PRC and USSR to complete for influence in Pyongyang through arms sales and economic aid.⁴³

Here again, the ethnic dimension of Korean nationalism that had first emerged amidst the nationalist backlash against Japanese colonial rule provided Kim Il-Sung with a ready-made tool – the newly-enunciated *Juche* ideology - with which he could portray himself as a protector of the Korean people whilst simultaneously securing his line against his Chinese and Soviet-backed rivals. Hearing of the plot, Kim counter-plotted by delaying the plenum and consolidating support from his own clique of supporters;⁴⁴ this measure bought time for Kim Il-Sung's promotion of himself as the one true leader of the Korean people (as exemplified by significantly increased extravagance in the portrayal of Kim's personality cult during the summer of 1956).⁴⁵ It is also logical that, in seeking to ensure the further consolidation of his power against potential future challengers, Kim would have needed to invoke the image of a clearly-identifiable foe that he could use to rally his people under his leadership.⁴⁶

Kim Il-Sung's strategy took the form of two parts: first, the promotion of a distinctly Korean interpretation of socialism that portrayed North Korea as a safe haven for the Korean people from a hostile outside world; to this, a selective, cherry-picking approach to the history of the Korean War was adopted that emphasized Kim Il-Sung's growing personality cult and supposed martial prowess (and conveniently leaving out the

42 Nobuo Shimotomai, 'Kim Il-Sung's Balancing Act Between Moscow and Beijing, 1956-1972,' ed. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

43 Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

44 Memorandum of Conversation with Premier Kim Il-Sung, from the diary of The Ambassador of the USSR in the DPRK Comrade Ivanov V.I.29 August – September 14, 1956, accessed via the Woodrow Wilson Center's North Korea International Documentation Project, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114136>.

45 Myers, *North Korea's Juche Myth*, 64-66.

46 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 141-57.

intervention of China and the USSR as well as the continued division of the Korean Peninsula).⁴⁷ Second, (and given the concurrent need to absolve himself of blame for the continued division of the Korean Peninsula as well as the continued US military presence in the South), Kim's propaganda machine has repeatedly sought to cast the US as an existential threat to the people of Korea. This strategy went so far as to portray the people of the South as, having been 'ethnically contaminated' by their association with the US and its embrace of capitalism, incompatible with the values of a "pure Korean people."⁴⁸

These two strategies complemented one another; by casting the US as the aggressor responsible for the division of the Korean Peninsula and the 'occupation' of the South, Kim Il-Sung was able to hold up a clearly identifiable, high-profile bogeyman whose existence not only threatened the people of Korea, but was also (in the North Korean narrative) responsible for the ethnic decadence and poverty of the Korean peoples' southern brethren.⁴⁹ Concurrently, by reenforcing the place of Kim Il-Sung as a strong leader capable of uniting the Korean people against an external aggressor, such a maneuver placed Kim in a position to portray himself as a hero of Korean nationalism⁵⁰ and legitimate heir to a unified Korean Peninsula,⁵¹ whilst simultaneously designating all future challengers to his rule as enemies to the Korean people and therefore liable to face liquidation.

Kim Il-Sung's efforts to promote his own brand of martial credentials provides a backdrop that accounts for the renewal of low-level border skirmishes with the ROK during the 1960s. The outbreak of the April 1960 Revolution in Seoul that toppled ROK President Rhee Syngman and Park

47 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 155.

48 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 153-57.

49 Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, 152-59.

50 John Everard, *Only Beautiful: A British Diplomat in North Korea* (Stanford: Walter Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2012), 182-83.

51 Suh, *Kim Il-Sung*, 256-57.

Chung-Hee's subsequent coup were taken by Kim Il-Sung as evidence of the disunity in the South.⁵² Furthermore, with the US increasingly bogged down in the quagmire of counter-insurgency operations in the Vietnam War, Kim Il-Sung came to believe that a campaign of prolonged, low-intensity border skirmishes would sap US willpower to maintain a presence on the Korean Peninsula.⁵³ It is likely that Kim Il-Sung sensed a new opportunity to unify the peninsula under his rule.⁵⁴

IV. Kim Jong-Il and *Songun*

Whilst it remains debated as to whether Kim Il-Sung had intended to be succeeded by his son at the time of the founding of the DPRK,⁵⁵ there is some evidence to suggest that the younger Kim saw hereditary succession as being in his interest. It should be recalled that although the younger Kim was the oldest son of Kim Il-Sung, the certainty of Kim Jong-Il's place in the North Korean political hierarchy was undermined by the death of his mother, Kim Jong-Suk, in 1949. Around the same time, Kim Il-Sung took a second wife, Kim Song-Ae, who gave birth to Kim Jong-Il's half-brother, Kim Pyong-Il, in 1954. With her newfound position of privilege and influence, Kim Song-Ae began the process of political machinations to rally senior members of the North Korean political establishment and thus ensure that her own son, not Kim Jong-Il, would succeed Kim Il-Sung.⁵⁶

52 Lankov, *The Real North Korea*, 27.

53 *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low intensity conflict in Korea 1966–1969* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1991), 35.

54 Fyodor Tertitskiy, 'How the Kim cult of personality came to dominate North Korean life,' *NK News*, Dec. 7, 2018, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2018/12/how-the-kim-cult-of-personality-came-to-dominate-north-korean-life/>.

55 Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, 194.

56 Jin-Sung Jang, *Dear Leader: North Korea's Senior Propagandist Exposes Shocking Truths Behind the Regime* (London: Random House, 2014), 130.

It is thus not surprising that Kim Jong-Il began his counter-moves against his step-mother and step-brother at an early age. Kim Song-Ae and her allies made the blunder of consigning Kim Jong-Il to what they apparently considered a lowly position in the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD) in 1966. From his post in the PAD, Kim subtly manipulated the existing *Juche* Doctrine that had been laid down by his father in order to prepare for his struggle to surpass Kim Pyong-Il and elevate himself as the aging Kim Il-Sung's successor. Particularly notable was Kim Jong-Il's amendment of *Juche* to become a "Suryongist" ideology centered on the personality cult that Kim Il-Sung had built around himself. This was evident in Kim Jong-Il's introduction of the 'Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Juche Idea' in 1967, and declared official state doctrine in 1974.⁵⁷ Such a strategy was reminiscent of how Stalin delivered the "Foundations of Leninism" series of lectures at Sverdlov University after Lenin's death that, whilst projecting the image of himself as a dedicated Leninist, was really intended to maximize his leverage in seeking power.⁵⁸ In the North Korean context, Kim Jong-Il outlined the theory of 'Kim Il Sungism' that established that the Supreme Leader – Kim Il-Sung - led the Party, and the Party led the people.⁵⁹ Such an act, whilst conveying an impression of devoted filial piety, was critical in elevating Kim Jong-Il into his father's favour, with the younger Kim securing his status as his father's official heir by the time of the Sixth Party Congress in 1980.⁶⁰

Nor did Kim Jong-Il cease his efforts to consolidate power at this point. Jang Jin-Sung (a pseudonym), a psychological warfare officer in the Korean Worker's Party's United Front Department who defected to the ROK in 2005, wrote that as early as the 1970s, Kim Jong-Il had already begun to quietly maneuver key allies and associates into positions of power within

57 Jong-Seok Woo, 'Songun Politics and the Political Weakness of the Military in North Korea: An Institutional Account,' *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 4 (2016): 253-262.

58 Robert Conquest, *Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (New York and London: Penguin, 1991).

59 Jang, *Dear Leader*, 132-33.

60 Jang, *Dear Leader*, 136-37.

Pyongyang.⁶¹ By Jang's account, during the 1970s, Kim Jong-Il established the United Front Department to implement a strategy of 'Localization' to affirm the Korean Workers' Party's authority over the North Korean military on the matter of inter-Korean relations. In contrast to the North Korean military's preference to recruit spies from southerners who had defected to the North, the localization strategy involved the kidnapping of South Korean and Japanese nationals in order to train North Korean spies in infiltration.⁶² Likewise, the 1983 Rangoon assassination attempt on South Korea's President, Chun Doo-Hwan, was likely instigated by Kim Jong-Il to underscore that, his youth at the time of the Korean War notwithstanding, he had the necessary martial prowess and anti-South hawkishness to succeed his father.

The implication of this thesis is that, even before assuming power, Kim Jong-Il had already come to see the North Korean military as his personal instrument for ensuring regime security against external and internal threats. Whilst the former was reflected in the continued post-Cold War US military presence in the South and the ROK's growing technological military prowess, the latter increasingly became a concern for Kim Jong-Il during the late 1980s onwards, when the collapse of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the USSR demonstrated the fragility of authoritarian rule against public dissent. The circumstances surrounding the collapse of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe are worth noting – the brutality and intrusive surveillance of organizations such as the East German Stasi Secret Police were simply not heavy-handed enough to suppress public demands for better living standards and food security. Such dynamics, transplanted into the Korean context, doubtless underscored to Kim Jong-Il the fragility of his own grip on power, as the growing food shortages and famine in North Korea during the 1990s took place alongside the growing prosperity of the South.

Amidst such a backdrop, Kim Jong-Il's strategy to ensure regime

61 Jang, *Dear Leader*, 137-38.

62 Jang, *Dear Leader*, 155-56.

survival was to take a leaf from his existing playbook – entrusting that the military of North Korea was answerable to him, and to him alone – thereby ensuring a monopoly of armed violence and combat-trained personnel against any internal challengers for power.⁶³ This was evident in Kim Jong-Il's enunciation of the *Songun* doctrine that elevated the status of the North Korean military in North Korean politics and society.⁶⁴ Beginning in 1995, North Korean state media espoused *Songun* as "emphasizing the perfect unity and the single-hearted unity of the party, army and the people, and the role of the army as the vanguards."⁶⁵ In so elevating the status of the military in the North Korean hierarchy, it is likely that Kim Jong-Il sought to ensure that its members would realize that their own interests lay in ensuring the Kim Family's continued position of power and privilege. After his defection, Jang recounted witnessing a farmer executed for stealing food; Jang observed "as the country was ruled according to the *Songun* policy ... all rice in the nation belonged to the military, and even petty crimes were dealt with according to martial law."⁶⁶ It is likely that the incorporation of such harshness served a dual purpose. First, by ensuring that members of the military would be among the first in line for scarce handouts of food, it would further underscore that their own well-being was dependent on their loyalty to the regime. Second, by empowering members of the military to take such punitive actions against their fellow Koreans, it further underscored their culpability in the brutality of the Kim Family. By bloodying their hands in the execution of harsh measures against the North Korean masses, it underscored that the fall of the Kim

63 Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, 'Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,' *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 44-74.

64 Han S. Park, 'Military-First Politics (Songun): Understanding Kim Jong-il's North Korea,' *Korea Economic Institute Academic Paper Series* 2, no. 7, Sept. 2007, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://keia.org/publication/military-first-politics-songun-understanding-kim-jong-ils-north-korea/>.

65 Robert L. Worden, *North Korea: A Country Study: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2011), 189.

66 Jang, *Dear Leader*, 58.

Family from power would leave senior members of the North Korean military vulnerable to reprisals from any post-Kim regime, thus giving the military all the more incentive to ensure that the Kim Family remains in power.⁶⁷

Likewise, Kim Jong-Il's commitment to the North Korean nuclear program served the purpose of ensuring a clique of pro-regime loyalists. Whilst there is some debate over the willingness of the North Korean leadership to voluntarily dismantle its nuclear weapons program following the signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994, the pace with which Pyongyang stepped up its nuclear program from 2003 onwards points to the increased prominence of pro-nuclear voices during Kim Jong-Il's last years, which has very likely carried over into the transition to the Kim Jong-Un era. Leon Sigal, a prominent proponent of the peaceful denuclearization of North Korea, argued that North Korea's 1998 Taepodong missile test and its undertaking of the Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program the same year reflected North Korea's concern that the Clinton Administration was not sincere in its implementation of the Agreed Framework, under which circumstance the North Korean leadership likely sought to hedge against the possibility of long-running US hostility.⁶⁸

Whilst Sigal's account provides a fair assessment of the possibility of a negotiated denuclearization of North Korea during the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, Sigal's argument is less convincing after 2005, and even less so from 2009 onwards, at the time of Barack Obama's succession to the White House. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq and downfall of Saddam Hussein was a reminder of the fate that could befall any non-nuclear armed authoritarian leader on poor terms with the US; such a North Korean view of the vulnerability of non-nuclear adversaries of the US has doubtless been further reinforced by the subsequent US toppling of Gadaffi of Libya

67 Byman and Lind, 'Pyongyang's Survival Strategy.'

68 Leon V. Sigal, 'Bad History,' *38 North*, Aug. 22, 2017, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2017/08/lsigal082217/>.

in 2011 and multiple US threats of war against Iran.

Concurrent to this, it is likely that the North Korean leadership sees the increased reluctance of the US to militarily confront North Korea since 2006 as vindication that its newfound nuclear arsenal constitutes a formidable source of negotiating leverage that offsets US military superiority. Prior to the October 2006 North Korean nuclear test, the Bush Administration had insisted on North Korean denuclearization as a precondition for any negotiation with Pyongyang;⁶⁹ from 2007 onwards, the Bush Administration adopted a significantly more flexible negotiating posture. Whilst Bush was likely driven by other factors to adopt a more flexible negotiating posture, such as the loss of Republican control of the US Congress and the need to address the ongoing quagmire in Iraq, the fact that the previously hawkish US President had now begun treating North Korea as a negotiating equal was an important symbolic victory for hardliners in Pyongyang in demonstrating how the *fait accompli* of North Korea's nuclear power status had enabled Pyongyang to defy the US. The fact that North Korea undertook further missile and nuclear tests almost immediately following Obama's succession to the White House in early 2009 – after an election campaign that had included a pledge to hold talks with Kim Jong-Il without preconditions – suggests that by 2009, the North Korean leadership had come to see its nuclear arsenal as being not up for negotiation.⁷⁰

V. Kim Jong-Un and *Byungjin*

It is against this backdrop of the Kim Family's increasingly militarized character and its commitment to its nuclear arsenal as an instrument of regime security that saw the succession of Kim Jong-Il's third son, Kim Jong-Un, in December 2011. As with the circumstances surrounding his

69 Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2007), 102-06.

70 Oberdorfer and Carlin, *The Two Koreas*, 431-33.

father's succession to power, Kim Jong-Un faced challengers within the family to his succession, in the form of his half-brother, Kim Jong-Nam, and his older brother, Kim Jong-Chul. Kim Jong-Un's comparative youth notwithstanding, his older rivals were beset by a number of factors that undermined their worthiness as successors in Kim Jong-Il's eyes. It was initially assumed that Kim Jong-Nam, as Kim Jong-Il's oldest son, would succeed him as Supreme Leader. A number of developments, however, undermined Kim Jong-Nam's claims, ranging from his being born to Song Hye-Rim, a mistress, rather than a spouse, of Kim Jong-Il, to an embarrassing incident in 2001 when he attempted to enter Japan with a forged Dominican passport bearing a Chinese name in an attempt to visit Disneyland.⁷¹ Kim Jong-Chul's standing was also tarnished by his inability to demonstrate a clear-cut martial commitment to the standing of the Kim Family. Kenji Fujimoto, who served as the Kim Family's sushi chef, claimed that Kim Jong-Il saw his oldest son as "no good because he is like a little girl,"⁷² a characterization that is presumably less than impressive for the purpose of underscoring the martial credentials of the next Supreme Leader.

Amidst the lack of martial prowess demonstrated by Kim Jong-Il's older sons, two particular skirmishes on the Northern Limit Line – the Inter-Korean maritime demarcation on the west coast – are notable in underscoring Kim Jong-Un's martial credentials, these being the sinking of the ROK corvette *Cheonan*, and the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in March and November 2010 respectively. Given the explicit nature of such direct attacks on the armed forces of the ROK, the authorization for these actions could have come only from a very high-ranking member of the North Korean Government. It is notable that, in the immediate run-up to both incidents, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-Un visited the North Korean military units believed responsible for the attacks on the ROK's military.⁷³

71 Lee, *The Hermit King*, 72-73.

72 Fujimoto, cited in *BBC*, "North Korea's secretive 'first family'," Dec. 13, 2013, accessed October 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11297747>.

Like his father before him, Kim Jong-Un did not have the benefit of participation in armed conflict to demonstrate the martial prowess befitting the next Supreme Leader. Under such circumstances, it was presumably necessary for the younger Kim to demonstrate the martial worthiness of the next Supreme Leader.

A similar rationale likely accounts for actions that have been undertaken by Kim Jong-Un since his official succession as Supreme Leader of North Korea. Shortly after Kim Jong-Il's death, the Obama Administration dispatched Special Envoy Glyn Davies for direct talks with the North Korean Government, presumably in the hope that the Swiss-educated Kim Jong-Un would be more amenable to improving relations. Under the terms of the resulting "Leap Year" Agreement of 29 February 2012, Pyongyang agreed to suspend any further missile and nuclear testing as a quid pro quo for US humanitarian aid; just two months later, North Korea went ahead with yet another missile test.⁷⁴ Although the April 2012 missile test was a failure, a further missile test in December 2012, combined with a barrage of belligerent rhetoric and threats of war against the ROK and the US in the spring of 2013, highlighted Pyongyang's continued hostility towards the ROK and US.⁷⁵

Given this backdrop, it is likely that North Korea's sabre-rattling in 2012-13 had a dual purpose: first, in line with the overall pattern of demonstrations of North Korea's brinkmanship diplomacy, such actions

73 Jean H. Lee, 'Cheonan attack may be tied to North Korean succession,' *Christian Science Monitor*, May 27, 2010, *Associated Press*, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.csmonitor.com/From-the-news-wires/2010/0527/Cheonan-attack-may-be-tied-to-North-Korean-succession>.

74 Ankit Panda, "A Great Leap to Nowhere: Remembering the US-North Korea 'Leap Day' Deal," *The Diplomat*, Feb. 29, 2016, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/a-great-leap-to-nowhere-remembering-the-us-north-korea-leap-day-deal/>.

75 Ewen MacAskill, 'US warns North Korea of increased isolation if threats escalate further,' *Guardian*, Mar. 29, 2013, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/29/us-condemns-north-korea-threats>.

were likely intended by Kim Jong-Un to signify a martial signature to define his legacy as Supreme Leader and thus ensure the loyalty of senior members of the military to his rule. Given the increased prominence of economic reform in Kim Jong-Un's *Byungjin* doctrine – including the tacit tolerance of an underground free market economy to improve North Korean standards of living⁷⁶ – it is probable that the new Supreme Leader sought to dispel concerns by senior members of the North Korean military that they risked losing their position of status and privilege under his rule. Second, it was also likely that the later demonstrations of North Korea's military capabilities were intended to 'make up' for any possible impressions of North Korean military weakness resulting from the failure of the April 2012 missile test.

In conjunction with the military aspects of *Byungjin*, the latter's economic component marks an acknowledgement by Kim Jong-Un that authoritarian repression does not suffice in ensuring regime survival, a point driven home by the outbreak of the Arab Spring since 2011. As Hyung-Gu Lynn noted, "even dictators need to provide sufficient public goods in order to mobilize labor, retain societal control, and foster loyalty."⁷⁷ Even whilst acknowledging the need for economic reform to forestall public dissent, Kim Jong-Un is concurrently wary of the risk of losing control of the process of economic reform. Kim Jong-Un is doubtless mindful of how Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* economic reforms inadvertently unleashed public dissent that brought about the collapse of the USSR. Similarly, Kim Jong-Un is aware that the Chinese economic model is limited in what it can offer his regime's grip on power given the significant differences between the economic circumstances of China and North Korea. It is thus notable that the economic reform that has been

76 Lankov, 'NK is no Stalinist country,' *The Korea Times*, Oct. 9, 2011, accessed December 16, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/10/304_96327.html.

77 Hyung-Gu Lynn, 'Assessing Political Stability in Post-Kim Jong-il North Korea,' *Korea Economic Institute*, Dec. 4, 2012, accessed March 14, 2021, http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/hyung-gu_lynn_paper.pdf.

carried out under the auspices of *Byungjin* have been extremely limited in their scope.⁷⁸ As North Korea's poverty and isolation stands in marked contrast to the prosperity and widespread international recognition of the ROK, Kim Jong-Un is doubtless aware that exposing North Korea to the extent of economic forces that have propelled China's economic growth would spell the end of the Kim Family's grip on power. By extension – and given that North Korean proponents of Chinese-styled economic modernization constitute possible challengers to Kim Jong-Un's leadership – the logical implication is to ensure that any departure from the ideological tenets of *Byungjin* constitute grounds for pre-emptive liquidation.

Such a backdrop may account for Kim Jong-Un's purge of his uncle, Jang Song-Thaek, and half-brother, Kim Jong-Un, in 2013 and 2017 respectively. The brutal nature with which these rivals to Kim Jong-Un were purged is noteworthy – Jang Song-Thaek was executed by being shot with a large-calibre anti-aircraft gun, whilst Kim Jong-Nam was poisoned with the VX nerve agent. The brutal nature of these purges was likely deliberate and presumably intended to signal to other would-be challengers to Kim Jong-Un that any rivalry to the Dear Leader would result in a painful death. Jang, who had served as Kim Jong-Il's deputy in the National Defense Commission, had been a proponent of emulating China's 1980s model of economic development for North Korea.⁷⁹ Jang's survival strategy had been to ingratiate himself in advancing Kim Jong-Il's plan for regime survival by borrowing elements of China's 1980s-styled economic modernization. Such a strategy would have succeeded only as long as the reigning member of the Kim Family saw emulation of China as instrumental to its own interests. In so doing, however, Jang's power and influence within Pyongyang during the Kim Jong-Il reign turned out to be

78 Tertitsky, 'A history of North Korea's party congresses.'

79 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 'Wen Jiabao Meets with DPRK Delegation of the Joint Steering Committee for Developing Two Economic Zones,' August 17, 2012, accessed March 21, 2021, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t962140.htm>.

his own undoing, following the leadership transition to Kim Jong-Un. By getting involved in the promotion of Chinese-styled economic reforms in North Korea, it is likely that Jang and his allies were receiving a significant cut of the profits of Sino-North Korean border trade, which would have enabled him to bribe senior members of the North Korean military into supporting him.⁸⁰ Whilst it would have been unnecessary (indeed, unwise) for Jang to play such a card during the Kim Jong-Il era given his position of privilege at the time, that exact same position, so close to the circles of power in Pyongyang, was almost certain to be seen by Kim Jong-un as a challenge to his power in the aftermath of his father's death.⁸¹

Similar circumstances offer a plausible account for the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Malaysia, in 2017. Prior to his loss of favour arising from his 2001 attempt to visit Japan on a forged passport, Kim Jong-Nam had been set to succeed his father and had, with the concurrence of Jang, been involved in attempting to expand the Information Technology sector to promote North Korea's economic growth.⁸² Following his 2001 fall from Kim Jong-Il's graces, Kim Jong-Nam took up residence in the Macau Special Administrative Region – under Chinese sovereignty – in 2003, an arrangement that was presumably 'tolerated' by Beijing to ensure that it had in its pocket a member of the Kim Family that the PRC could install as a reliable, pro-Beijing puppet at short notice in the event of internal instability leading to a power vacuum in Pyongyang.⁸³

80 Lee, *The Hermit King*, 128.

81 Lee, *The Hermit King*, 155.

82 Julian Ryall, 'Profile: Who was Kim Jong-nam, the exiled half-brother of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un?,' *The Telegraph*, Feb. 14, 2017, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/14/profile-kim-jong-nam-exiled-half-brother-north-korean-dictator/>.

83 John Power, 'What Does the Kim Jong-Nam Assassination Mean for China?,' *The Diplomat*, Feb. 17, 2017, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/what-does-the-kim-jong-nam-assassination-mean-for-china/>.

From his exile, Kim Jong-Nam voiced his scepticism of the longevity of the Kim Family's grip on power following the death of his father.⁸⁴ As with Jang's attempts to emulate Chinese-styled economic reform, such a strategy amounted to a half-measure for surviving the 'Game of Thrones' in Pyongyang, particularly once Kim Jong-Nam had outlived his usefulness to both Beijing as well as the Kingmakers in Pyongyang. Particularly notable was that Kim Jong-Nam was travelling alone at the time of the assassination. It may be presumed that, so long as he was a potentially useful 'pro-Beijing puppet in waiting,' the Chinese Communist Party would have had reason to provide bodyguard protection for such a potential asset. It is thus worth speculating if the Chinese Communist Party, having calculated that with Kim Jong-Un's consolidation of power in Pyongyang, Beijing no longer had any need for the continued existence of Kim Jong-Nam and may have thus terminated his bodyguard detail.⁸⁵ Such an action on the part of China may have been meant as a subtle 'peace offering' to Kim Jong-Un: although Beijing was paying lip-service to US demands to impose sanctions on North Korea, China's underlying priority was to ensure the continued existence of a pro-Beijing regime in Pyongyang.

Even as Kim Jong-Un continued his efforts to consolidate his leadership succession through inheriting the personality cult built up by his father and grandfather, a series of convergent challenges underscore the narrowness with which Kim Jong-Un has to navigate his leadership of North Korea. Within Pyongyang, the youth at which Kim Jong-Un took up the position of Supreme Leader (he was in his late 20s or early 30s at the time of his father's death in 2011)⁸⁶ poses awkward questions with regards

84 Kyung Lah, 'Kim Jong Il's other son expects North Korean regime to fail, journalist says,' *CNN*, Jan. 17, 2012, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/17/world/asia/north-korea-kim-other-son/index.html>.

85 Georgy Toloraya, 'Kim Jong Nam's Assassination: What Lies Beneath?,' *38 North*, Mar. 20, 2017, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2017/03/gtoloraya030717/>.

86 Jung H. Park, 'The Education of Kim-Jong-Un,' *Brookings Institution*, Feb., 2018, accessed March 24, 2021,

to the emerging pattern of leadership from father to son established by his predecessors. This is evident given the haste with which Kim Jong-Il arranged for his son's marriage to Ri Sol-Ju after suffering a stroke in 2008, presumably in a bid to provide an heir if any ill fate befell Kim Jong-Un.⁸⁷ Yet, even if such an arrangement had produced any offspring – a *BBC* report in 2018 claims that Ri had recently given birth to their third child⁸⁸ – this would be of little usefulness in continuing the Kim Family line for at least a decade as this manuscript goes to press. In the meantime, given the 'dog-eat-dog' world of North Korean politics described in this manuscript as well as reports of Kim Jong-Un's ill health⁸⁹ – he was reported missing for some three weeks in 2020⁹⁰ – the potential for a power vacuum likely contributed to his appointing his younger sister, Kim Yo-Jong, to a series of powerful positions in Pyongyang. These include the position of Deputy Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department between 2014 and 2019, and Deputy Director of the United Front Department since 2019. Moreover, like her brother and father before her, it is apparent that Kim Yo-Jong has seen the need to undertake armed provocations against the ROK to demonstrate her martial worthiness as a potential successor to the post of Supreme Leader (a difficult task, given the rigid, conservative casting of gender roles in North Korean society).⁹¹ Such an account provides a probable explanation for the North Korean destruction of the

<https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-education-of-kim-jong-un/>.

87 *BBC*, 'North Korea leader Kim Jong-un married to Ri Sol-ju,' Jul. 26, 2012, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18986249>.

88 *BBC*, 'Keeping up with the Kims: North Korea's elusive first family,' Feb. 7, 2018, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41081356>.

89 Justin MacCurry and Enjoli Liston, 'North Korea admits to Kim Jong-un's ill-health for first time,' *Guardian*, Nov. 30, 2017, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/26/north-korea-kim-jong-un-ill-health>.

90 Cynthia Kim, 'Kim Jong-un makes first public appearance in 22 days amid virus outbreak,' *Reuters*, Feb. 16, 2020, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-anniversary-idUSKBN2090TE>.

91 Lee, *The Hermit King*, 153-56.

Inter-Korean Liaison Office in Kaesong in 2020, an action that Kim Yo-Jong was closely involved in.⁹² Also in 2021, Andrei Lankov noted that the creation of the new post of First Secretary of the Workers Party of Korea is likely intended to facilitate the appointment of Kim Yo Jong as a de facto deputy head of state to prevent a power vacuum in the event of Kim Jong-Un's incapacitation.⁹³

VI. Conclusion: North Korean Ideology in the Post-COVID Era?

The patterns of North Korean political thought discussed in this manuscript are a shadowy reflection of the paranoia with which the Kim Family sees a hostile world (both among rivals for power within Pyongyang, and from outside North Korea). Such paranoia has presumably increased in response to what the Kim Family likely perceives to be significantly narrowed room for maneuver in its efforts to ensure regime survival. This is evident due to the following three developments.

The first issue concerns the probability that the COVID-19 pandemic in China had spread into North Korea in early 2020, likely via Chinese traders at the 장마당 (*Jangmadang*) markets on the Sino-North Korean border. Although North Korean state media has denied the existence of the virus within its territory, such a claim is not particularly convincing, given the extent of the extraordinary public health measures that Pyongyang adopted in early 2020, including the closure of the border with China and mandating the cremation of all newly-deceased persons.⁹⁴ Given the

92 *BBC*, 'North Korea blows up joint liaison office with South in Kaesong,' Jun. 16, 2020, accessed March 25, 2021, <http://bbc.com/news/world-asia-53060620>.

93 Lankov, 'North Korea's ruling party rule revisions presage trouble at the top,' *NK News*, Jun. 16, 2021, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/06/north-koreas-ruling-party-rule-revisions-presage-trouble-at-the-top/?t=1639595068127>.

94 Tae-Jun Kang, 'North Korea's Bizarre Strategies for Tackling the Coronavirus Outbreak,' *The Diplomat*, Feb. 14, 2020, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/north-koreas-bizarre-strategies-for-tackling->

existing shortages of food and medical supplies to the North Korean masses, the impact of COVID in North Korea can only be speculated. Whilst the Kim Family is not likely to be moved by the death toll itself, it is aware that the closure of the border with China, by stunting commerce and intensifying food shortages in the country,⁹⁵ has increased the potential for internal unrest among the masses. This points to the probability of the Kim Family taking further steps to ensure the continued status of privilege and power enjoyed by senior members of the North Korean military, along with the extensive apparatus of internal surveillance and secret police. Moreover, given the economic fallout that has resulted from North Korea's closure of its borders since the outbreak of COVID, the Kim Family, aware of the potential for public discontent, has further enhanced its powers of internal surveillance and control,⁹⁶ in particular against the soft power image of South Korea's political liberalization and economic prosperity.⁹⁷ Yet, such measures can only go so far. The Kim Family's ability to continue to grant the stream of luxury goods to its clique of loyalists has depended on its ability to generate foreign exchange reserves through remittances from North Korean expatriate workers,⁹⁸ the sale of contraband items such as firearms,⁹⁹ and methamphetamines,¹⁰⁰ the pre-COVID fledgling tourist

the-coronavirus-outbreak/.

95 Laura Bicker, 'As winter looms, reports of starvation in North Korea,' *BBC*, Nov. 5, 2021, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59144712>.

96 Leonid Petrov, 'COVID-19 in North Korea,' Asia and the Pacific Policy Society, Apr. 7, 2021, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.policyforum.net/covid-19-in-north-korea/>.

97 Dafna Zur, 'North Korean Fears of South Korean Culture,' Korean Economic Institute, Sept. 22, 2021, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/north-korean-fears-of-south-korean-culture/>.

98 Simon Mundy, 'North Korean workers exploited abroad to pay Pyongyang's bills,' *Financial Times*, May 8, 2015, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/e84af180-e0f7-11e4-8b1a-00144feab7de>.

99 'The North Koreans Are Better Gunrunners Than You Might Think,' *Foreign Policy*, Jul. 17, 2013, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/17/the-north-koreans-are-better-gunrunners-than-you-might-think/>.

industry,¹⁰¹ and the forging of US dollars.¹⁰² Given the extensive impact that the COVID pandemic has had on the world economy, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the Kim Family will be able to continue to draw on these sources of revenue.

A second issue concerns the triangular rivalry between US and its allies on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other. Even whilst depending on superpower patronage from Beijing and Moscow, Kim Il-Sung had simultaneously sought to play China and the USSR against each other.¹⁰³ Apart from the Korean War, Pyongyang had been able to play such a strategy whilst simultaneously avoiding the onset of great power conflict. In more recent times, however, China's rapid ascendance as a rising superpower - a development that Pyongyang has no control over - has brought to the forefront the possibility of a Cold War-like confrontation between Beijing and Washington. Were such a standoff to escalate into an armed conflict, it is inevitable that North Korea will be unable to remain aloof, even if China and the US were to come to blows over issues not related to the Korean Peninsula, such as Beijing's ambition to regain control of Taiwan.

Furthermore, Russia is the only other major power that Pyongyang can turn to, both as a great power that is willing to threaten armed intervention against the prospective scenario of a US-led war regime

100 Mike Ives, 'Crystal Meth Is North Korea's Trendiest Lunar New Year's Gift,' *The New York Times*, Feb. 12, 2019, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/world/asia/north-korea-crystal-meth-methamphetamine-drugs-.html>.

101 Jeremy Howell, 'Selling North Korea as a tourist destination,' *BBC*, Nov. 3, 2014, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-29889023>.

102 Tara Francis Chan, 'A \$100 counterfeit 'supernote' found in South Korea could have been made in North Korea,' *Business Insider*, Dec. 14, 2017, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/counterfeit-supernote-found-in-south-korea-2017-12>.

103 Shimotomai, 'Kim Il-Sung's Balancing Act Between Moscow and Beijing.'

against Pyongyang, as well as a source of food and foreign exchange reserves in providing a lifeline for the Kim Family's regime security. Barring a dramatic change in the governance of Beijing and Moscow and their relations with the Biden Administration and his successors, it is likely that China and Russia will become increasingly assertive against the US in the Northeast Asian region, as reflected in how the joint Sino-Russian aerial overflight over Dokdo in 2019 was likely intended to highlight the willingness of both China and Russia to be a 'spoiler' against any US-brokered denuclearization deal that failed to acknowledge Chinese and Russian interests in a stable North Korea.

Such a backdrop points to the likelihood of the Kim Family continuing to face the challenge of juggling the internal dynamics of political factionalism in Pyongyang alongside the machinations of foreign powers. If the overall pattern with which the succeeding Supreme Leaders of North Korea have sought to consolidate their leadership transition is anything to go by, the authors anticipate efforts by the Kim Family to brandish their self-proclaimed martial credentials as defenders of the North Korean people. In the present context, and taking into account the extent of the paranoia of the Kim Family, this is likely to translate into a long-term commitment by the Kim Family to the North Korean nuclear weapons program, both to stave off the prospect of a US-led war of regime change, as well as in ensuring the continued loyalty of senior members of the military to the Kim Family.

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