

Elite Volatility and Change in North Korean Politics: 1997–2010

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the change in the composition of the North Korean elite from 1997–2010. It examines 256 public appearances by Kim Jong Il that were reported as an ‘inspection,’ ‘field guidance’ or ‘on-the-spot guidance’ visits. In particular, the paper examines 30 mentioned individuals who accompanied Kim Jong Il at least five times from 1997 to 2010 on these inspection tours. It finds that there was a great deal of volatility and change from 1999–2004 followed by a period of stability. Further, there was a shift away from a conservative perspective to a more moderate and pragmatic perspective surrounding the ‘Dear Leader.’ This has continued under the current leader, Kim Jong Un. The implications of this shift are discussed.

Keywords

Elite volatility, Pedersen Index, Kim Jong Il, North Korea

North Korea, as the modern incarnation of the ‘hermit kingdom,’ has been a notoriously difficult case for political scientists to study systematically. Much of the scholarly inquiry has either been based on anecdotal and impressionistic ‘readings of the tea leaves’ similar to previous ‘kremlino-logical’ approaches in older Soviet studies, general descriptions of the history of the regime, or broad ‘strategic’ predictions on the future of the regime (often without empirical support). However, recently there have been a number of systemic works on North Korea (see for instance Eberstadt, 2007; Haggard and Noland, 2007; Noland, 2004) with most of these focused on the state of the North Korean economy or its nuclear program and, more recently, public opinion using expatriate populations of North Koreans in Manchuria (Noland and Haggard, 2011).

This paper, however, proposes to empirically examine the change in the composition of the North Korean elite from 1997–2010, a particularly tumultuous period in the history of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The period began with process of the consolidation of power for Kim Jong Il (after his official emergence as the new *Suryong*, or undisputed leader) followed by the economic collapse of the country and great famine of the late 1970s. Further, the period includes efforts at economic reform from 2000–2002, a nuclear crisis beginning in 2006, and the illness and selection of Kim Jong Un as successor to his father the ‘Dear Leader’

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Kim Jong Il. The period ended with a military confrontation with South Korea, resulting in the sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* in March 2010.

The first part of the paper introduces the conceptual and theoretical framework, beginning with the issue of whether there is a ‘reformist’ versus ‘hardliner’ cleavage in the North Korean elite, a discussion of the basic leader-centric nature of the North Korean state and, finally, the management style of Kim Jong Il. Second, I assess the changing composition of the political elite in North Korea from 1997–2010, focusing particularly on the volatility in the composition of the inner circle surrounding Kim Jong Il. Third, I examine developments since the death of Kim Jong Il in 2011, and whether the inner circle surrounding his successor and third son has changed or not in the short months following December 2011. Finally I offer some observations regarding the implications these changes have on the receptivity of the regime to a normalization of relations with the West and future economic and political reform.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

‘Reformists’ vs. ‘Hardliners’ in North Korea?

Are there policy cleavages within the North Korean political elite? Generally, the extant literature on the metamorphosis of the elite over this period of time has tended to involve a debate over whether or not there are ‘true’ reformers in the regime (Chung, 2004; Gause, 2004; Kim, 2006; Kwon and Ford, 2005; Lee, 2007; Lim, 2002) or whether the reforms of the early 2000s largely occurred *despite* the regime rather than because of intentional reforms (Haggard and Noland, 2007). Indeed, there is some speculation that no real policy differences exist within the political elite, and as Klingner (2010: 4) notes:

There is little evidence of a faction that advocates bold economic reform and opening the country to outside influence, reducing the regime’s bellicose rhetoric and brinkmanship tactics, or abandoning its nuclear weapons programs. In classic ‘good cop, bad cop’ strategy, North Korea has long perpetuated the image of factional infighting between ‘engagers’ and ‘hardliners’ as a negotiating tool to elicit additional benefits. Rather, it is a division of roles with all playing their part in order to gain maximum diplomatic and economic benefits. In the words of a Korean adage, ‘the same animal has sharp claws and soft fur.’

Nonetheless, as Gause (2004) argues, although there may not be a true reformist impulse within the DPRK regime, there certainly are those within the regime who are more pragmatic as opposed to ideologically rigid in their orientations, although they were just as loyal to the ‘Dear Leader.’ Indeed, what almost all analysts agree on is that the North Korean elite is bound together by the overwhelming desire to promote the survival of the state and the perpetuation of the system. Yet the best way to do this – either to maintain the survival of the regime either via economic and military self-sufficiency (or isolation) as proscribed by the *Juche* (loosely translated as ‘self-sufficiency’ or ‘self-reliance’) ideology, or by engagement with South Korea and the United States (US) and to follow the example of China (albeit in a limited way) – is a matter of debate.

Has the composition of the political elite changed from 1997–2010? Regarding this question, I am less interested in the exact composition of the elite (in other words a who’s who listing of power), and more interested in the stability and balance of policy perspectives within the elite (i.e. the balance between ideological conservatives and moderates). Given that Kim Jong Il’s decision-making was often absolutist, but also involved input from different sources (albeit a very limited group in his inner circle) before making a decision, this balance of perspectives within the group closest to him provides insight into his (and his successor’s) policy preferences (Kim, 2006: 102).

Although Klingner (2010) may be quite right, that these policy pronouncements are a fraud, and merely represent a ‘good cop/bad copy’ strategy on the part of the regime, if the inner circle appears to be populated by ‘good cops,’ this may at least reflect the regime’s willingness to entertain a more pragmatic approach to economic change (at least a tolerance for markets) and some form of rapprochement with South Korea and the United States. Further, importantly, it would also be possible (having such a baseline) to compare current developments under Kim Jong Un to detect if there have been substantial changes since the death of Kim Jong Il.

This paper is interested in two dimensions when describing the elite grouping surrounding Kim Jong Il. To what extent has there been elite stability or volatility in the inner policy circles of the North Korean regime? And, to what extent has the composition of the group changed in terms of the balance between ‘conservatives’ who favor policies that conform to the ideological principles of *Juche* (and in terms of relations with the outside world are quite ‘hardline’) and the ‘moderates,’ who take a more pragmatic approach to policy?

Before turning to an empirical assessment of these questions and also how events over the past 14 years have correlated with changes in the composition of the North Korean political elite, the next sections provide a brief description of the nature of the current North Korean regime, and the challenges it has faced since 1997, as well as a theoretical framework by which to understand the political management style of Kim Jong Il

The Nature of the North Korean State: The Leader and the System

Doing research on North Korean politics is a daunting challenge for political scientists. In many ways this is due to the extremely secretive nature of the country, and the lack of reliable data regarding the most basic features of the state. For instance, North Korea has not released a statistical yearbook since 1963, although in 1989, as part of a deal with the United Nations, demographic data were released by the North Korean Central Statistics Bureau in exchange for assistance to conduct the first nationwide census since the establishment of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. Insights into the policy process are even more limited, and most of the information that has been provided is by high level defectors such as the late Hwang Jang Yop, the Korean Workers’ Party top ideologist in the 1980s. Often even simple questions about the policy process or how North Korea’s leaders make decisions cannot be answered satisfactorily.

Moreover, North Korea is difficult to understand because of its rather unique combination of a traditional dynastic Confucian society, with a façade of Stalinism. As Kangdan Oh Hassig (2004: ES 1) notes:

North Korea’s distinctive characteristic is that the Kim family, father and son (as well as assorted family members), have ruled in this Confucian-Stalinist tradition for over half a century, running the country somewhat like the autocratic founder of a private corporation that operates without transparency or accountability.

However, knowledge about North Korea has improved greatly over the past two decades, in part because of the attention paid by the United States to the DPRK (because of its expanding nuclear weapons program) and in part because of the move towards the normalization of relations following the introduction of the ‘sunshine’ policy of constructive engagement by the then South Korean President Kim Dae Jung in 1998. Indeed, over the past decade or so, there has emerged an increasing body of systematic work on North Korea, particularly regarding the evolution of the political elite (see for instance Jeon, 2000a; Jeon 2000b).

A key question that has been addressed in much of the literature relates to the nature of the North Korean state. Essentially, the North Korean state can be thought of as a leader-centric regime

where power is concentrated into the hands of the *Suryong* and emanates outward in a radial fashion – what Mansourov (2004) calls the ‘transmission belts’ of the regime.

Historically there were several stages in the development of the current regime. The initial state-building phase occurred with the Soviet occupation period from 1945 until the beginning of the Korean War in 1950, where the basic features of the Korean Workers Party and the North Korean state were created, modeled, not surprisingly, after the Soviet Union. However, Kim Il Sung, who was favored by the Soviet occupation authorities, however, was not the undisputed leader or *Suryong* that he would become later. Rather, he was *primus inter pares*, with other important leaders heading factions in competition with Kim Il Sung’s *Kapsan* or guerilla faction (or the faction who had fought with Kim Il Sung as an anti-Japanese Korean communist guerilla in Manchuria, and who had fled with him to the Soviet Union in 1940). These included: the Soviet Korean faction (made up of Korean residents of the Soviet Union, who had accompanied the Soviet occupation army and stayed in Korea after the departure of the Soviets in 1948) headed by Ho Ka-I; the Yenan faction (or Korean communists who had fought with the Chinese Communists in the anti-Japanese guerilla war) headed by Mu Chong and Kim Tu bong; and the domestic faction (or those communists who continued underground activities in Korea under the Japanese occupation) headed by Pak Hon Yong, the first Foreign Minister of the DPRK (Armstrong, 2004; Lee, 1967).

It was during this period that the basic blueprint of the informal power structure was established. Although there was a formal structure of governmental power and, like all Stalinist systems, a major role played by the Korean Workers Party, real power was in the hands of an informal network of Soviet Koreans, which the Soviet occupation authorities had established to ensure the loyalty of the regime to the Soviet Union. This shadow apparatus involved naming members of the Soviet Korean faction as Vice Minister in each ministry.¹ This network also controlled the Bureau of General Affairs, Secretariat, and Bureau of Leaders (a personnel agency for high-level appointments) and also controlled the security apparatus. This included the Political Defense Bureau, which was nominally under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but in reality acted as a separate and powerful police apparatus loyal to the Soviet Korean faction.

However, after the collapse of the North Korean military effort in 1950, and the subsequent disastrous retreat to the Yalu river (followed by the Chinese intervention and the military stalemate and truce in 1953), the Soviet Koreans were held responsible by Kim Il Sung for the mass defection of cadres from the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) during the war (since party building was in the hands of the Soviet Korean faction). Ho Ka-i was demoted in 1951 and committed ‘suicide’ in 1953. Later the Yenan faction was also purged (as was the domestic faction). By the end of the 1950s, Kim Il Sung had successfully removed his factional rivals and emerged dominant.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Kim Il Sung consolidated his authority (despite a reported brief internal challenge by some members of the military in 1968; Kim, 2006). By the 1980s Kim Il Sung was the Great Leader, the infallible *Suryong*. It was also during this time that the ideology of *Juche* was developed to justify the existence of Kim’s cult of personality. Kim Il Sung’s eldest son, Kim Jong Il, was a key architect of the ideology in the 1980s (along with Hwang Jang Yop). The *Juche* ideology consists of the philosophical theory, which maintains that the masses are the masters of history and revolution, and the guiding principle, or the ‘Revolutionary View of the Leader,’ which asserts that the masses are not able to take up spontaneously any revolutionary course unless they are organized into revolutionary forces and are led by the *Suryong* (the Leader). Kim Il Sung was not just the ‘iron-willed, ever-victorious commander,’ the ‘respected and beloved Great Leader:’ he was also the ‘head and heart’ of the state, and the ‘supreme brain of the nation.’ This organic view of the state is rather unique to the North Korean version of communism, and places the leader at the center of all power (Kim, 2006: 105–136).

The death of Kim Il Sung's shook the system to its core. His death in 1994 also occurred during a time of great uncertainty and crisis for the regime. The collapse of the Soviet Union had created great economic hardships for the regime in the 1990s. North Korea had depended heavily on the Soviet Union for fuel subsidies and markets for its products, and the demise of the Soviet Union overnight deprived the North Korean state access to cheap fuel, leading to the rapid shrinkage of the economy. Ultimately, the economic downturn, coupled with a series of poor harvests, resulted in the great famine of the late 1990s in which several hundred thousand North Koreans died of starvation (Haggard and Noland, 2007).

It was during this time of extreme challenges to the regime that Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung's anointed successor, engaged in a remarkable strategy to consolidate his power, via the 'honor-power' system (Jeon, 2000b). This practice involved retaining senior officials from his father's regime in honorary positions, but real power was passed to their 'subordinates' in the various ministries and military commands. According to Gause (2004), this in part was inspired by practices established during the earliest years of the state under the Soviet Koreans, where real power lay in the hands of the second echelon apparatchiks to perform surveillance and control functions, and an informal network of close associates of the *Suryong* rather than via formal positions in the party/state.

The Political Management Style of Kim Jong Il

Understanding the management style that characterized the leadership of Kim Jong Il helps to explain why it is important to examine informal connections with the leader, given his tendency was to focus on hierarchy and 'divide and rule' in leader–elite relations. To understand the management style of Kim Jong Il, it is useful to refer to some of the classic literature on US presidential management styles. Richard Tanner Johnson's (1974) path-breaking analysis of presidential management in the United States identified three basic management styles: competitive, collegial, and formalistic systems. The competitive approach to advisor management promotes conflict among advisors who have overlapping areas of responsibility. The leader in this style acts as the 'arbitrator' between competing advisors.

Managed conflict is also part of the collegial structure as well, but in this arrangement the leader does not use conflict and overlapping assignments as a means to generate proposals and policies. A collegial advisory system attempts to use differences in viewpoint as a means to find policy solutions to which all agree is politically doable – from the interaction within the team divergent views arise and this vetting of perspectives leads to a 'feasible' policy. The collegial system stands in contrast to the formalistic model where there are formal hierarchies which transmit information to the leader, who makes the ultimate decision on which policy is best.

Alexander George and Juliette George (1998), building upon Johnson's framework, argued, unlike Johnson, that management systems depend less on the policy dilemma's that individual leaders face, and more on the personality characteristics of the leader. In particular, psychological characteristics influence a leader's choice of collegial, formalistic or competitive structures by determining how the president will receive information, interact with advisors and explore issues (see also Hermann and Preston, 1994).

Sung Chull Kim (2006: 102–103) has identified several key features of Kim Jong Il's personality that structured his management style. Using the classic framework developed by James David Barber (1985), he contends that Kim Jong Il had an 'active-negative' personality – in other words, the 'Dear Leader' had a compulsion to be very active, and the need to have a structured and ordered hierarchy to exercise the maximum of control and the desire to manage even the smallest details.

On the other hand, his level of activity was personally unsatisfying, and he had a generally negative attitude towards the world around him, seeing constant threats to his person and position. This negative element of his personality drove his desire to control more and more areas of policy, and to view those around him with suspicion as potential threats. This resulted, according to Kim (2006), in Kim Jong Il's preference for a mix of formalistic and competitive models. On the one hand, Kim controlled the institutions of the state separately and depended on hierarchical bureaucratic mechanisms, but he consistently promoted competition between individuals around him (partially as a way to 'divide and rule' and thereby neutralizing potential future threats). Thus, in many ways, those who surrounded the Dear Leader were more an indicator of the orientation of Kim Jong Il at the time, as opposed to representing independent policy alternatives.

Borrowing from the literature on leadership management style and party politics in new democracies, particularly the idea of 'elite volatility,' the following section examines changes in the composition of the political elite. To measure composition of the elite, I examine the composition of the entourage that accompanied the 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong Il (and later Kim Jong Un) on inspection tours, where the leader engages in 'visits' and provides 'field' and 'on-the-spot' guidance. These tours are particularly important and insightful inasmuch, as Ken Gause (2004) notes, Kim Jong Il was reluctant to preside over meetings and preferred 'behind-the-scenes' national administration. Thus the role of the Politburo and other traditional centers of power had deteriorated, whereas the positions of those who accompanied Kim on his 'on-the-spot' guidance tours (such as members of the Secretariat and military) were enhanced. Indeed, as the South Korean Ministry of National Unification notes (reported in Gause, 2004), these inspection tours usually include the top members (but not all) of the official hierarchy, namely the National Defense Commission, the Korean Workers' Party Secretariat, and the Central Committee apparatus. Thus who participates in such inspection tours is a particularly important indicator of the balance of political forces surrounding the *Suryong*.

However, it is important to note that these visits do not include all members of the elite. Indeed, it is possible that a member of the 'elite' would never have accompanied the 'Dear Leader' on inspection visits – but this is not particularly relevant for the purposes of this paper. What is important is *who* appears with the leader. Given that these inspection tours are carefully planned, and given the management style of Kim Jong Il and his preference for divide and rule tactics, the balance within the entourage must be also carefully constructed. Thus who appears with the leader on these inspection tours provides important insights on the policy orientations of the regime.

Assessing the Changing Composition of the Political Elite in North Korea, 1997–2010

How does one assess who is part of this network of close associates of the leader? Although official positions and functions may provide some clues as to which elites have access to Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, real access can be ascertained by observing the individuals who frequently accompany them on their inspection tours (Gause, 2004; Lim, 2002). Other studies have examined these inspection tours. In a study conducted by Stephen Haggard (2011), Kim Jong Il's 'on-the-spot-guidance' tours from 1990 through 2010 were examined. With the exception of a noticeable emphasis on economic units in 1996, during the peak famine period (the period from 1990 through 1997) there was a steady increase in visits to military units during this period. This was a time of political transition, when Kim Jong Il was consolidating his power and emphasizing the 'military-first' policy (*Songun*). Hence appeals to the military were part of this process of power consolidation. In 1998, however, economic sites started to increase in the share of sites that were visited.

Haggard and Noland interpret this to mean that the leadership was preoccupied with reconstruction and was contemplating the reforms introduced during the brief window from the North–South summit of 2000 through the roll-out of the July 2002 measures. However, from the onset of the nuclear crisis from 2006–2007 the military once again became the favored destination of Kim Jong Il’s inspection tours. The authors interpret this to mean that there was a turn towards more ideologically conservative economic policies, as well as greater hostility to the West.

For the purposes of this paper, like previous studies, I examined 256 public appearances by Kim Jong Il from 1997–2010 that were reported as an ‘inspection,’ ‘field guidance’ or ‘on-the-spot guidance’ visits that were listed by the Korean Central News Agency (the official news agency of the DPRK). Although all of these terms are used by the North Korean media when describing visits by the ‘Dear Leader’ it is not always clear if there are any real differences in meaning among these expressions, although field guidance and on-the-spot guidance are the terms most often used (Yonhap News Agency, 2003: 158). The term ‘on-the-spot guidance’ (*hyŏnji chido*) originated with the introduction of Kim Il Sung’s *Ch’ŏngsan-ni* Method of agricultural and industrial management. Based on the ‘anti-bureaucratism’ campaigns of the early 1960s where the DPRK leadership claimed that farm workers were unhappy and produced low output because low-ranking functionaries of the KWP, by expounding abstract Marxist theories and slogans, were using incorrect tactics that failed to motivate the workers. What was needed, according to this method, was the spontaneous on-the-spot guidance, which provided a better incentive for productivity. To correct this, the leadership recommended that the workers receive specific guidance in solving production problems and be promised readily available material incentives. The *Ch’ŏngsan-ni* Method called for high-ranking party officials, party cadres, and administrative officials to emulate Kim Il Sung by making field inspections and providing on-the-spot guidance. However, the most prestigious ‘guidance’ was provided by the Great Leader himself. The system also theoretically provided opportunities for farmers to present their grievances and ideas to leading cadres and managers, at least in theory (Kim, 2006).

This practice of field guidance, or on-the-spot guidance, was continued by Kim Jong Il (and his successor Kim Jong Un as well) but it was far less spontaneous than is suggested by the term ‘on the spot.’ Factories, military units, agricultural organizations, educational institutions, and cultural organizations were informed one year before the actual on-the-spot guidance was to be given. These enterprises and organizations were expected to meticulously prepare for the visit by the Dear Leader. Guidance visits were primarily targeted at sectors of high priority to the regime (such as military units, or collective farms and food production) and Kim’s instructions were seen as the basis of policy priorities (Yonhap News Agency, 2003: 164). Indeed, accompanying the Dear Leader as part of his entourage on these inspection tours was determined well in advance, and was considered highly prestigious for the participants.

Thus the composition of the entourage provides insight into who constituted the informal network upon which Kim Jong Il relied. There are two issues I address when assessing the composition of the entourage that accompanied Kim Jong Il on this inspection tours. To what extent was there significant volatility in the leadership entourage, and was this volatility associated with ‘external’ events such as changes in relations with the outside world? And second, in which direction (conservative or moderate) is the trend in leadership change?

To address these questions I examined 30 mentioned individuals who accompanied Kim Jong Il at least five times from 1997 to 2010 on these inspection tours. By selecting only those who frequently accompanied Kim Jong Il on these visits omitted from consideration the occasional courtesy invitation (such as listing a regional party or state functionary as part of the entourage, or a local commander or enterprise manager).

Table 1. List of individuals coded.

Name	Orientation (Gause, 2004; Lim, 2002)	Name	Orientation	Name	Orientation
Chae Thae Bok	Moderate	Kim Kuk Thae	Conservative	Paek Hak Rim	Conservative
Hyon Chol Hae	Open Former Kim II Sung bodyguard	Kim Gye Kwan	Moderate	Pak Jae Gyong	Open
Jang Song Taek	Moderate	Kim Kyok Sik	Open	Pak Nam Gi	Open executed 2010
Jo Myong Rok	Conservative	Kim Kyung Hui	Open Kim Jong il's sister	Pak Pong Ju	Moderate
Jon Pyong Ho	Conservative	Kim Yang Gon	Moderate	Pak Song Chol	Moderate
Ju Kyu Chang	Open	Kim Yong Chun	Conservative	Ri Myong Su	Moderate associated with Jang Song taek
Kang Sok Ju	Moderate	Kim Yong Ju	Conservative	Ri Ul Sol	Open Kim II Sung bodyguard no network
Kim il Chol	Conservative	Kim Yong Nam	Conservative	Ri Yong Chol	Open Died 2010
Kim Jong Gak	Conservative	Kim Yong Sun	Moderate	Ri Yong Ho	Moderate protégé of Kang Sok Ju
Kim Ki Nam	Moderate	Kye Ung Thae	Conservative	Yon Hyong Muk	Moderate

Second, I classified each individual listed as either conservative, open, or moderate, using a combined list of members of the North Korean elite taken as reported by Lim (2002) and Gause (2004) and supplemented this data with classifications of individual elite members made by the website NKleadershipwatch (<http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/>). In general, although there are some differences between these three sources, there are common characteristics that Lim, Gause and NKleadershipwatch share. First, conservatives oppose rapprochement with the West and seek to pursue economic policies that are rigidly in line with the ideological principles of Juche – thus markets are not to be tolerated and there should be an immediate resocialization of the economy. Moderates tend to favor some form of rapprochement with the US and South Korea, and tolerance of markets and special economic zones as necessary evils for the survival of the regime (although Lim refers to many of these individual as ‘reformist,’² as Gause [2004] points out that this term is inappropriate in the North Korean context). Finally there are those who Gause (2004) refers to as open as those where it was not clear which direction they leaned. Table 1 reports the list of the top 30 individuals who most accompanied Kim Jong II on his inspection tours from 1997–2010. Other individuals who were not classified based on this list (and were not classified by the three sources mentioned above) were listed as ‘unknown.’

To assess the extent to which there was volatility in the North Korean elite from 1997–2010, I calculated, by year, the share of the entourage that were made up of conservatives, open, and moderate participants (as identified by the above three sources) in the inspection tours. Then, employing the often used Pedersen Index of Volatility, which has been used to measure volatility over time in party systems, I measure the extent to which shifts in shares of conservatives, open, and moderates occurred from year to year during the period 1997–2010.

The Pedersen index is calculated using the following formula

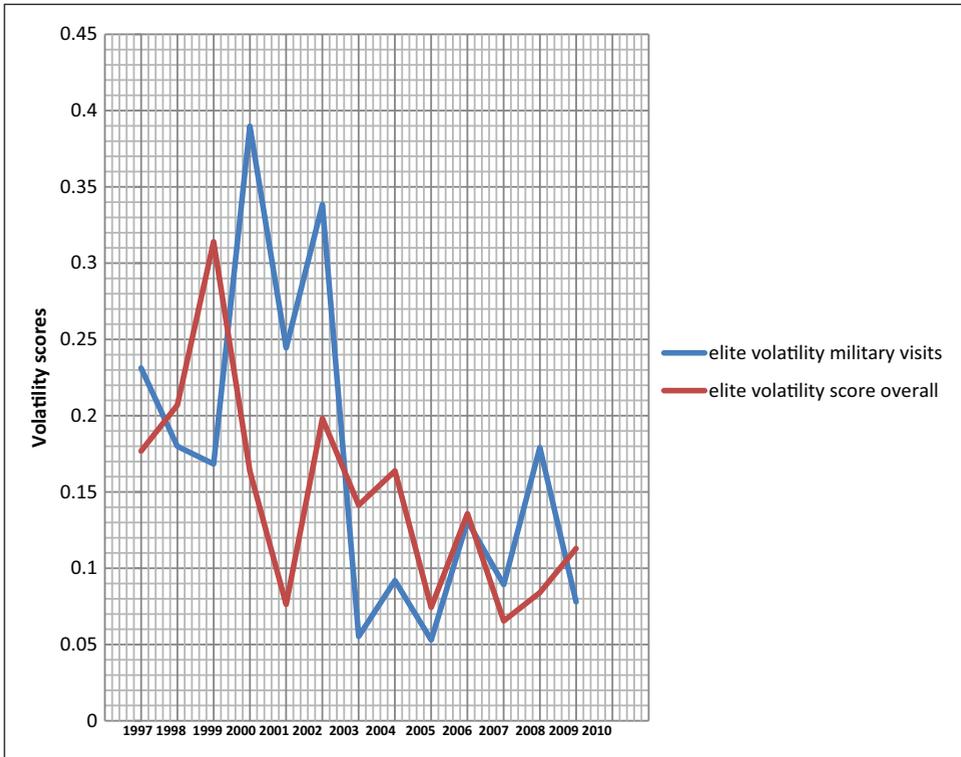


Figure 1. Elite volatility scores 1997–2010.

$$\text{Volatility} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n |P_{it} - P_{i(t+1)}|}{2}$$

where n is number of conservatives, open, or moderate members of Kim Jong Il’s entourage on his inspection visits and p_i represents the percentage share of the entourage made up of each faction in time periods t and $t + 1$ (in this case from year to year). The higher the value, the greater the volatility in the elite, meaning rapid shifts from one grouping to another.

Figure 1 plots the annual volatility scores for the composition of Kim Jong Il’s entourage from 1997–2010. Two levels of volatility are reported: volatility in the elite overall and volatility in the entourage that accompanied the Dear Leader on his inspections of military units. Given the importance of the ‘Military First’ policy (*Songun*) announced in 1997, the composition of the entourage inspecting military units is particularly important.

As is clear from Figure 1, the highest level of volatility occurred shortly after the announcement of the South Korean President Kim Dae Jung’s ‘sunshine’ policy in 1998 and continued until 2002 (particularly in the military). Generally there was initially a great turnover in the civilian visits (particularly in 1999) and followed by a jump in the volatility in the military inspections in 2000. This suggests that the North Korean regime was responsive to the South Korean sunshine policy in some fundamental ways, particularly at the level of the elite. Although many conservatives remained on the National Defense Council and in the Secretariat, they virtually disappeared from Kim Jong Il’s entourage on inspection tours by 2004. This means that there were very high levels of turnover during this

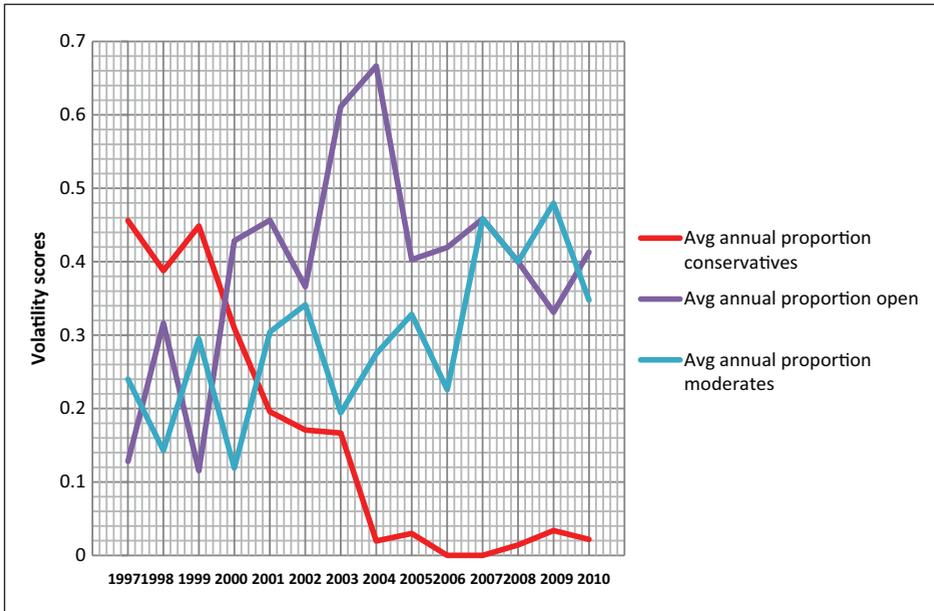


Figure 2. Average annual proportion of inspection tours made up of conservatives, open, and moderates.

period, where much of the entourage was replaced by new members of the elite, and there was a fundamental shift in shares of conservatives, open, and moderates in Kim Jong Il's entourage. This turnover stabilized around 2003–2004, and has remained fairly stable thereafter.

Although Figure 1 indicates there was a high degree of turnover in the elite and a fundamental shift in the direction of one faction over the other, Figure 2 provides an indication of the *direction* of the shift. As indicated in Figure 2, the volatility in the elite in the earliest years of the 21st century was also accompanied by a fundamental shift away from the conservative faction.

By 2006, ironically the same year in which the North Korea conducted its first nuclear test, the proportion of conservatives in Kim Jong Il's entourage had dwindled to zero on inspection tours in that year. Initially, there was a shift in the direction of those who had no particular policy orientation, but were personally close to Kim Jong Il (such as his father's former bodyguards Hyon Chol Hae and Ri Ul Sol). However, the proportion of moderates has increased steadily over the period (it is important to note that this does not mean that the number of moderates increased, but that moderates were more likely to accompany Kim Jong Il than were conservatives). To a large extent this was because of the Dear Leader's increasing reliance (since his major health problems began) on his brother in law Jang Song Taek, and Ri Myong Su, the chief military strategist, who had been a protégé of Jang's older brother in the Korean People's Army (KPA). Both of these men were associated with the moderate faction in Kim Jong Il's entourage.

Shifts in the Composition of the Political Elite in under Kim Jong Un

What has happened since the death of Kim Jong Il and the ascendancy of his third son Kim Jong Un to the leadership of the regime? Kim Jong Un, like his father and grandfather before him,

continued the practice of inspection tours and on-the-spot guidance in the first three months of 2012. His first inspection trip was to a military unit in early January 2012, and by the end of March he had made 17 inspection visits. In comparison, in the first official year of Kim Jong Il's ascendancy to the mantle of leadership in 1997, he made a total of 23 inspection visits *for the entire year*. Thus Kim Jong Un was quite active in the first few months of his rule. Further, like his father, he has focused his attention on visits to military installations: of the 17 inspection tours, 13 (or 76.5%) were to military facilities or military units. This is similar to the frequency that Kim Jong Il visited military facilities and units in 1997: 19 of 23 visits were military inspections (or 82.6%).

There are some notable differences as well. For example, in three instances (all to military installations) Kim Jong Un was reported as having conducted the inspection alone, without an accompanying entourage. Although it is highly unlikely that he was not accompanied by other members of the elite on the inspection tour, this might reflect the effort to establish the independent credibility of the new leader, particularly regarding relations with the military. In contrast, his father was never reported as having conducted an inspection without an officially announced entourage.

Further, there were notable differences in the composition of the groups that accompanied the new leader in comparison to those that accompanied Kim Jong Il during the latter part of his rule. Although the conservative percent of the share of those accompanying Kim Jong Un was consistent with the patterns of the recent past (around 4%) there have been declines in the percent of 'open' and 'moderates' (at 12.6% and 18.3% currently). The largest increase has been in the percent share of 'unknowns' (which comprised a 63.3% share of the entourages). This would suggest that, with the succession of a new leader, a new group has been elevated to the circle of elites around Kim Jong Un. For instance, among the military officers who accompany the new leader, several are lower ranking officers (such as lower ranking generals and colonels, in contrast to the field marshals and generals who would accompany his father).

One additional noteworthy feature of the inspections tours conducted by Kim Jong Un in 2012 has been the very prominent role played by his uncle Jang Song Taek. Jang has accompanied Kim Jong Un on six of his 17 inspection tours, more so than any other individual. This supports the rather widespread speculation that Jang would play a major role in helping to guide the young Kim during the transition period.

Conclusion

As demonstrated earlier, there was a fundamental shift in the composition of the elite in the first years of the 21st century that appears to have resulted from the North Korean regime's response to the sunshine policy of South Korea, and the economic and political realities on the ground after the great famine and economic collapse of the late 1990s. Further, it appears that there occurred a shift in the direction of the moderate grouping, although this has not been accompanied by a real commitment for reform, nor necessarily a greater effort at normalizing relations with the United States or South Korea since 2003. The entire period since 2003 has been marked by a confrontation with the West over North Korea's growing nuclear capacity and increasing tensions with South Korea, particularly after the election of Lee Myung Bok in 2008 (which marked the end of the previous South Korean administration's policy of engagement with North Korea). By 2010 the confrontation had developed into something of a shooting war, with the sinking of the *Cheonan* in the Spring of 2010.

In terms of internal reforms, although in the first few years of the 21st century the regime appeared to embrace reform, markets, and was responsive to the South Korean sunshine policy, by

the end of the decade an attempt at resocializing the economy occurred, and the legal and semi-legal markets that had emerged in the large cities of the country were dismantled. Further, actions were taken to 'sop up' the excess currency in the population by adopting an ill-conceived currency reform in 2009 (at a 100 to one rate) which made the previous currency worthless, wiping out the savings of the growing middle class, which had benefitted from the tolerance of markets earlier in the decade. This resulted in widespread public unrest, and the state had to quickly reverse course on the currency reform, relax its control over the markets, and tacitly permit private economic activities again. What remained, according to Frank (2010), was a 'deeply shamed state that decided to look the other way again and shifted its focus on political power and its perpetuation.'

Despite the promise of reform in the first part of decade, and despite the replacement of conservatives with more pragmatic political leaders, why has there been a shift away from reform and engagement? Although one might argue that the 'moderate' leadership was really revealing their 'true colors' and reverting to policies with which they found more ideologically comfortable, an alternative explanation is that external events have compelled the North Korean leadership to move away from reform (or at least the tolerance of markets and trade). Simply put, the new generation of leaders in North Korea was faced with an extremely unfavorable external environment. The Bush administration's declaration that North Korea was part of the 'axis of evil' became a tangible security threat after the war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq started in spring 2003. The election of conservative Lee Myung Bak as President of South Korea in 2008 ended consecutive South Korean administrations committed to constructive engagement with the north. Further, the most crucial person for the monolithic system's stability, the leader himself, Kim Jong Il had serious health problems. There were further concerns regarding dangerous individualist ways of thinking, and problems of rising social inequality. All of these developments served to compel the regime to slow down reform, not because those closest to Kim Jong Il were ideological conservatives, but because they were motivated by the genuine fear that the state would collapse. Accelerating the nuclear weapons program to develop a credible nuclear deterrent, coupled with the fear that economic reforms were unleashing social forces that could challenge the regime, which led to the crackdown on internal markets and the currency reform, was a product of this fear.

However, the current composition of the elite is very different than the ideologically conservative elite that had surrounded Kim Jong Il in the early years of his rule. Leading military conservatives have passed from the scene: Jo Myong Rok died in 2010, although his role on inspection tours had decreased significantly since 1997, and Kim Il Chol retired in 2010, to be replaced by more pragmatic military officers such as Ri Myong Su and civilian leaders such as Jang Song Taek. Ideology is much less a yardstick to measure policy than it was in the 1990s. Further, this political elite has been quite stable (i.e. Kim's entourage has not changed dramatically since 2003) and is likely to be receptive to attempts at normalizing relations with the United States and South Korea, provided guarantees for the survival of the regime are made.

Under Kim Jong Un, although there has clearly been an influx of a cadre of younger elites into the circle surrounding the new leader, prominent moderates, such as Jang Song Taek and Ri Yong Ho, have become more visible in the entourage surrounding the younger Kim. This would suggest that, if anything, a leadership that will continue to be receptive to attempts at normalizing relations with the West.

Somewhat ironically, the current leadership may become more receptive to a rapprochement with the West as it develops a more credible nuclear deterrent in the future. On the other hand, with the survival of the state guaranteed, there may be also an attempt to rapidly resocialize the economy and to re-establish the Stalinist Command economy. Perhaps an indicator of these future scenarios will depend on how volatile the inner circle becomes over the course of the next few years, as the new leader consolidates his power in North Korea.

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Notes

1. According to one assessment done by the United States in the early 1950s, the vice ministers' 'authority was considered greater than that of the minister' (Department of State, 1951: 1).
2. It should be noted that it would be a mistake to label any group within the elite as 'reformist.' As Haggard and Noland (2007) note, the 'reforms' of the early 21st century that had been initiated by the state were really not reforms at all but the recognition of a reality that had grown out of the collapse of the Stalinist economy in the 1990s and its replacement by a regionalized black market economy. Thus, unlike in China, where the Communist Party leadership initiated market liberalization, the changes in North Korea that occurred were in fact in complete defiance of official regulations and in spite of frequent crack-downs. Thus differences in terms of policy have been over whether or not to *tolerate* these spontaneous markets, not over whether or not to embrace economic reform.

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