



Assessing the leadership transition in North Korea: Using network analysis of field inspections, 1997–2012



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in the in the composition of the North Korean elite from 1997 to 2012, a particularly tumultuous period in the history of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Specifically, the paper assesses the changing composition of the leadership networks around both Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, using data from the entourage that accompanied the great leaders on their “on the spot guidance” inspection tours. The paper finds that there have been significant changes in the leadership elite since the succession of Kim Jong Un. The paper offers 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.

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North Korea, given its highly secretive nature, has been very difficult for political science scholars to study systematically. Indeed, much of the scholarly inquiry has either been based on anecdotal and impressionistic “readings of the tea leaves” or broad “strategic” predictions on the future of the regime (often without empirical support). More recently, a newer generation of scholarship has examined North Korean politics more systematically (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, or on public opinion using expatriate populations of North Koreans in Manchuria (Noland and Haggard, 2011).

This paper, however, focuses on the level of the political elite in North Korea, particularly how the circle around Kim Jong Il, and his successor Kim Jong Un, has changed over time. In this paper I use network analysis to examine how shifts occurred in the entourages around Kim Jong Il over time in response to both external and internal “shocks” to the system – for example, the Great Famine, the institution of economic reforms in 2002, Kim Jong Il's illness and Kim Jong Un's ascendancy to leadership.

This paper examines empirically the change in the composition of the North Korean elite from 1997 to 2012, 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. This followed by the economic collapse of the country and great famine of the late 1990s. Further, the period includes: efforts at economic reform after 2002, a nuclear crisis beginning in 2006, and the illness and selection and ascendancy of Kim Jong Un as successor to his father, the “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il.

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 within the North Korean elite and a discussion of the basic leader-centric nature of the North Korean state. Second, I assess the changing composition of the networks around both Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. 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 reforms.

1. Conceptual and theoretical framework

1.1. “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 from 1997 to 2012 has tended to involve a debate over whether or not there are “true” reformers in the regime (McEachern, 2010, 2008; Lee, 2007; Carlin and Witt, 2006; Kim, 2006; Kwon and Ford, 2005; Chung, 2004; Gause, 2004; 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).

On the one hand, such scholars as Carlin and Witt (2006) argue that within the elite there exist real ideological differences and these are in conflict with one another, particularly on the issues of guns versus butter, or military versus economic concerns. Carlin and Witt (2006), in particular, contend that there is a distinct, principled division between those whom they call “conservatives” and “reformers.” For their analysis the authors use opinions expressed in editorials of two different publications, the quarterly economic journal *Kyongje Yongu*, and the Worker’s Party Newspaper *Nodong Sinmun*. The authors argue that there exist two different perspectives, not necessarily connected to particular state institutions. The first contends that reform is necessary because with declining economy resources available for the defense sector will shrink. If North Korea does not reverse this trend, the security of the state will be jeopardized. Thus there should be greater emphasis on economic growth, which requires economic reform. On the other hand opponents to reform who write for *Nodong Sinmun* believe that greater openness and “contamination” by outside influences will undermine the state and ultimately lead to the collapse of the DPRK.

While Carlin and Witt focus on principled or ideological debates within the North Korean leadership, McEachern (2010, 2008), on the other hand, focuses more on competing institutional interests that frame policy debates in North Korea, particularly between the cabinet (government), the military (the KPA), and the party (The Korean Workers’ Party). The debate thus is less about individual differences but over differences in terms of institutional interests. These approaches suggest that there is a real debate over policy alternatives—thus shifts in leadership should also result in shifts in personnel and correspondingly in ideological issues, as well as in institutional interests represented by those closest to the *Suryong*.

On the other hand, there are those who deny that real policy differences exist within the political elite. For instance, as Klingner (2010:4) argues, there is little evidence of factional dispute within the DPRK regime, ideological, institutional, or otherwise. Rather the image of internal policy struggles is perpetuated for political show, where the image of factional infighting between “engagers” and “hardliners” is used as a negotiating tool by the regime to extract additional benefits. This orchestrated division of roles is designed to leverage maximum diplomatic and economic benefits.

Gause (2004) takes a middle road between the two perspectives and argues that although there may not be a true ideological or institutional debate within the DPRK regime, there certainly are those within the regime who are more pragmatic as opposed to those who are ideologically rigid in their orientations, although they are just as loyal to the “Leader”. What unifies this elite is their desire to promote the survival of the state, although there is debate over the best way how to accomplish this goal either via economic and military self sufficiency (or isolation) as proscribed by the *Juche* ideology, or by engagement with South Korea and the United States and to follow the example of China (albeit in a limited way).

Has the composition of the political elite changed from 1997 to 2012? Given that Kim Jong Il’s decision making was often absolutist (and this tradition of leadership has certainly carried over to his son), 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 cop” 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 in the network since the death of Kim Jong Il.

This paper is interested in one important dimension when describing the elite grouping around Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. To what extent has the composition of the network around the great leaders changed in terms of the balance between “conservatives,” who favor policies that conform to the ideological principles of *Juche* or “self-sufficiency” (and in terms of relations with the outside world are quite “hardline”) and the “moderates”, who take a more pragmatic approach to policy?

2. Assessing the changing composition of the political networks around Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un

Essentially, the North Korean State can be thought of as a leader-centric regime where power is concentrated in the hands of the *Suryong*. Power radiates outward from this central political hub and represents the transmission belts of the regime (Mansourov, 2004). Thus proximity to the leader provides insight as to which perspectives have influence, and which have not.

How does one assess who is part of the 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 Noland and Haggard (2011), Kim Jong Il’s “on-the-spot-

Table 1

List of individuals coded.

Name	Orientation	Name	Orientation	Name	Orientation
Chae Thae Bok	Moderate	Kim Kuk Thae	Conservative	Paek Hak Rim	Conservative
Hyon Chol Hae	Open Former Kim Il sung bodyguard	Kim Gye Kwan	Moderate	Pak Jae Gyong	Open
Jang Song Taek	Moderate Executed 2013	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 Il 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	Conservative
Kim Ki Nam	Moderate	Kye Ung Thae	Conservative	Yon Hyong Muk	Moderate

Source: [Lim, 2002](#); [Gause, 2004](#); author's compilation.

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 (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 to 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, I examined 256 public appearances by Kim Jong Il from 1997 to 2011 and the 53 visits in the first part of 2012 by Kim Jong Un that were reported as an “inspection”, “field guidance” or “on the spot guidance” visits, which 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, this approach emphasized practical guidance, rather than abstract Marxist theories and slogans, 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 earlier that the actual on the spot guidance is 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 were determined well in advance, and were 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 (and presumably Kim Jong Un) relied. To examine this network I examined 30 mentioned individuals who accompanied Kim Jong Il at least four times from 1997 to 2011 on these inspection tours. For Kim Jong Un, I included individuals who accompanied the new leader at least twice in 2012 (given the shorter time frame a lower threshold was used). This amounted to 41 individuals for Kim Jong Un. By selecting only those who frequently accompanied Kim Jong Il (and Kim Jong Un in 2012) 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).

Second, I classified each individual listed as either Conservative, Open, or Moderate (or unknown) 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

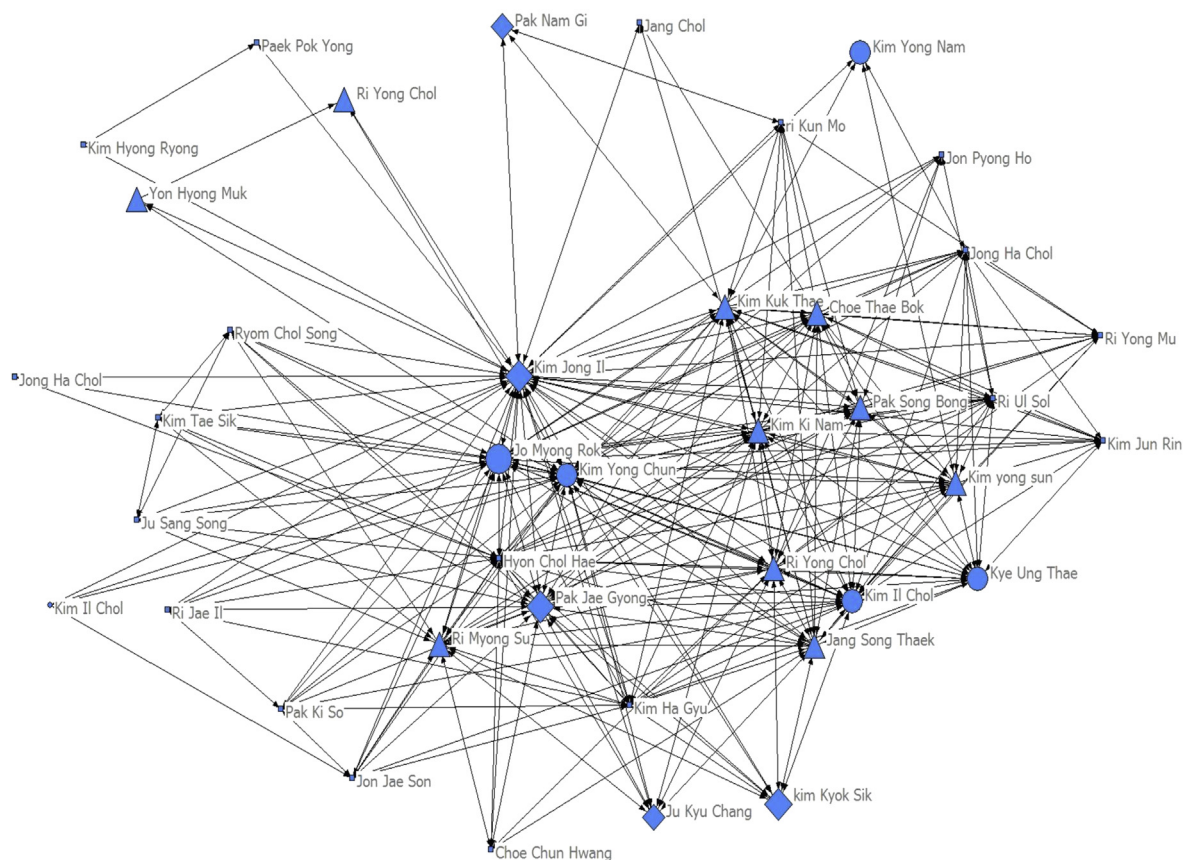


Fig. 1. Leadership Network January 1997–June 2002 Circles = Conservatives Triangles = Moderates Diamonds = Neutral.

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 NK leadershipwatch 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 re-socialization 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 individuals as “reformist,”¹ Gause (2004) points out that this term is inappropriate in the North Korean context. Finally there are those to whom Gause (2004) refers as **Open**, as it was not clear which direction they leaned. Table 1 reports the list of the top 30 individuals who most often accompanied Kim Jong Il on his inspection tours from 1997 to 2010. Other individuals, who were not classified either in this list, or in the three sources mentioned above, were listed as “**Unknown**.”

3. Analysis

To analyze changes in the composition of the leadership circle around both Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, I employ the technique of *network analysis*. Network analysis concerns relationships defined by links among nodes (or agents). Nodes can be individuals or corporate actors, such as organizations and states. Network analysis addresses the associations among nodes rather than the attributes of particular nodes. It is grounded in three principles: nodes and their behaviors are mutually dependent, not autonomous; ties between nodes can be channels for transmission of both material (for example, weapons, money, or disease) and non-material products (for example, information, beliefs, and norms); and persistent patterns of association among nodes create structures that can define, enable, or restrict the behavior of nodes. In network analysis, networks are defined as any set or sets of ties between any set or sets of nodes; unlike the study of network forms of

¹ The “Sunshine Policy” was the foreign policy of South Korea towards North Korea, introduced by then South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and carried on by his successors from 1998 until 2007 (ending with the election of the conservative Lee Myung-bak). The policy emphasized greater cooperation and normalization of relations between North and South.

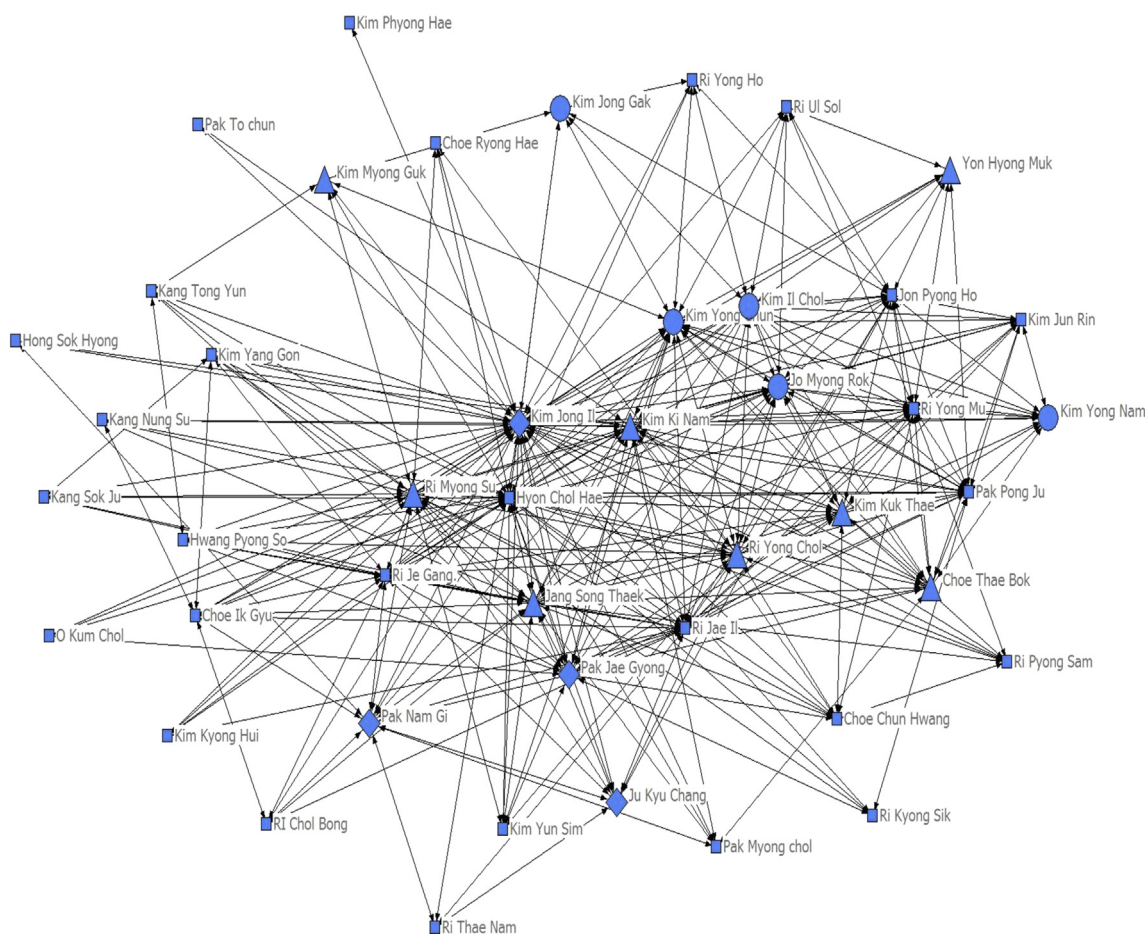


Fig. 2. Leadership Network July, 2002–July, 2009 Circles = Conservatives Triangles = Moderates Diamonds = Neutral.

organization, no assumptions are made about the homogeneity or other characteristics of the nodes or ties. Consequently, network analysis can be used to analyze any kind of ties, including market and hierarchical transactions (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009).

Network analysis is ideal for analyzing and graphically representing networks around key individuals. In particular, ego networks, where “ego” is an individual “focal” node (such as the great leader) is particularly appropriate for the analysis of a leaders centric system such as North Korea’s. The resulting network illustrates the centrality of the leader, and how other nodes align relative to the central node.

To populate the original two node matrix, data on attendance of inspection visits were collected from the Korea Central News Agency daily reports in English (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm>). Included were all individuals who had accompanied Kim Jong Il at least four times between 1997 and 2011 and Kim Jong Un twice in 2012. The first step was to compile a two node data set, where individuals were listed on the rows and whether or not they were listed as part of the entourage. To determine the number of inspection visits that individuals attended, we constructed a matrix by multiplying the two node matrix times its transpose ($Y = XX'$). The result is a matrix in which the ij th cell records the number of events that individual I and individual J attended in common.

The data were then inputted into the program UCInet, producing four different network graphics. The first includes inspections that occurred between January 1997 to July 2002, or roughly the period that included the official ascendance of Kim Jong Il, the Great Famine, the introduction of the “Military First” policy and just prior to introduction of economic reforms in July 2002. The second network covers the period of inspection visits by Kim Jong Il from July 2002 until July 2009, when it was first reported that the Dear Leader was seriously ill. The third period includes the illness of Kim Jong Il and preparations for the leadership transition to Kim Jong Un that took place from July 2009 until Kim Jong Il’s death in the fall of 2011. Finally, the last network graphic covers the first ten months of 2012, or the period of Kim Jong Un’s leadership.

Fig. 1 shows the network that surrounded Kim Jong Il from 1997 to 2002. The nodes are shape-coded where circle nodes indicate those identified as “conservatives,” triangles indicate those who are identified as “moderates”, and those in diamonds

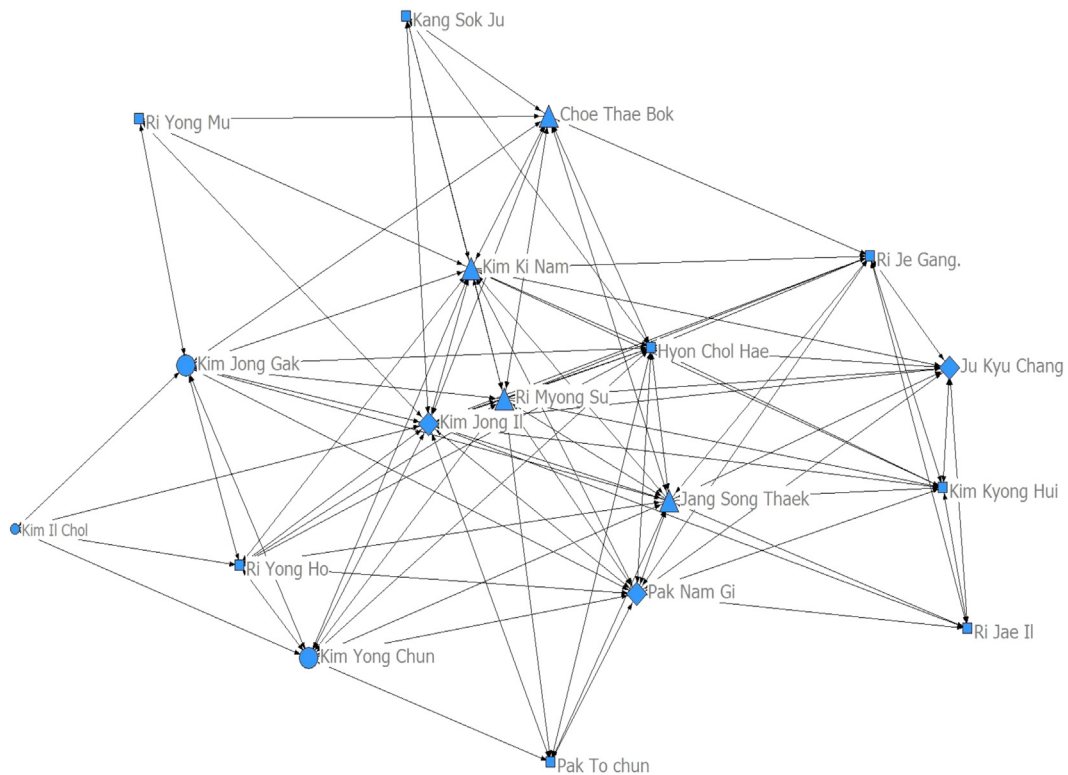


Fig. 3. Leadership Network, July 2009–December 2011 Circles = Conservatives Triangles = Moderates Diamonds = Neutral.

as “open.” Those who are squares are unknown, although some of these individuals have had special relationship with either Kim Jong Il (such as his sister and Kim Jong Un’s Aunt, Kim Kyong Hui) or with his father (such as bodyguards Hyon Chol Hae and Ri Ul Sol).

As is indicated in the graphic, conservatives and military officers (particularly Vice Marshals Jo Myong Rok and Kim Yong Chun) were closest to Kim Jong Il, followed closely by Hyon Chol Hae, a Korean People’s Army (KPA) general, and Pak Jae Gyong, a KPA Major General, who had risen in the ranks along with Kim Jong Il, and had developed a close relationship with him. Pak had in 1995 taken the lead in initiating several propaganda campaigns, in the form of loyalty and leadership contests, within the KPA to boost Kim Jong-il’s succession. The fact that those closest to Kim Jong Il were military generals, and had had ties with Kim Il Song, is not particularly surprising given that Kim Jong Il’s ascendancy to power had only occurred in 1994 (officially in 1997) and only after the introduction of the “Military First” policy in 1997 and the crisis the regime was facing, as the result of the great famine.

Fig. 2 illustrates the network around Kim Jong Il from 2002 to 09, or the period following the institution of economic reforms in 2002, but also included the acceleration of the North Korean nuclear program and ended with the public news of Kim Jong Il’s illness. Something of a change occurred in the network of individuals most proximate to Kim Jong Il. The figures who emerge close to Kim Jong Il during this period include key civilian party moderates, associated with Kim Jong Il’s brother in law Jang Song Taek, including Kim Ki Nam and Marshal Ri Myong Su.

The late Jang Song Taek (who was recently purged and executed) was Kim Jong il’s brother in law and had a long career in civilian administration. He also had many business connections, which he developed over the years, and many of which involve foreign connections. His career progressed rapidly in the 1980s. In 1986, Jang was elected a deputy (delegate) to the 6th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA). In June, 1989, he was elected an alternate (candidate) member to the KWP Central Committee, and promoted to full (regular) member in December, 1992. He traveled abroad, including the Republic of Korea several times in the 1990s. He disappeared from the public scene from 2003 to 2006, but returned in January 2006. In March of the same year he led a North Korean delegation to China and in December 2007, was appointed director of the KWP’s Administration Department. In this position Jang assumed management of the country’s internal and domestic security apparatus, policy inspection groups and control of state-owned enterprises.

At the first plenum of the 12th Supreme People’s Assembly in April 2009, Jang was elected as one of the new members of the National Defence Commission (the most powerful political organization in the country). Since June 2009, Jang was one of the most frequent attendees of Kim Jong-il’s public appearances. In June 2010 Jang Song Taek was elected Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission. On 28 September 2010 he was elected an alternate member of the Central Committee KWP Political Bureau (becoming a full member under Kim Jong Un) and a member of the Central Military Commission.

Kim Ki Nam is a civilian party leader (who was also a professor at Kim Il Sung University in the 1950s). He is considered to have been quite close with Kim Jong Il and his career has tracked that of the Dear Leader. During the 1980s he led a number of publicity initiatives both to support Kim Jong Il's succession and to establish Kim Il Sung's role in history. Kim had a significant role in the authorship of essays and speeches attributed to Kim Jong Il. He also managed the establishment, reported by DPRK media as "discoveries," of slogan-bearing trees. With over four decades of service in the central party, Kim Ki Nam exerted tremendous policy and personnel influence over the country's press, media, fine arts and publishing. He has also served as the party's key author of political slogans and plays a leading role in official approval or authorship of essays, slogans and other media in support of the hereditary succession. Finally he has been called Kim Jong Il's "drinking buddy" attending numerous "close aide" and Kim family parties and other social events. Kim also had close ties to Jang Song Taek and Kim Jong Il's sister, Kim Kyong Hui, as well as links to the Minister of State Security, General U Tong Chuk.

Another figure that emerged during the period 2002–2009 was Marshal Ri Myong Su. He was not reported as having a particularly close or personal relationship with Kim Jong Il (unlike Kim Ki Nam and Jang Song Taek). Ri's link with the Dear Leader, is more indirect, and through Jang Song Taek (with whom he had close ties). This is because he had close ties to the late Vice Marshal (now deceased) Jang Song U, who was commander of III Army Corps headquartered around Pyongyang, when Ri served as its chief of staff—Jang Song U was Jang Song Taek's older brother. Ri's service in the III Army Corps, which forms Pyongyang's outer defensive ring, occurred during a major personnel shuffle of senior KPA officials and the formal transition from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il.

A final key figure, but who was not connected with Jang Song Taek, but who continued to appear close to Kim Jong Il was General Hyon Chol Hae. Hyon was Kim Il Sung's body guard during the Korean War, and has enjoyed privileged access to the Kim family for decades. General Hyon, along with Ri Myong Su with whom he regularly appears in Kim Jong Il's entourage, has been a central player in Kim Jong Il's military management for 15 years. General Ri and he appeared with Kim Jong Il in his appearances before, around and after his August 2008 stroke. Hyon also traveled to China with Kim Jong Il in May 2010. It has been speculated that Hyon Chol Hae was involved in a power competition with Jang Song Taek. However, Hyon's power was derived entirely from his proximity to Kim Jong Il. He does not have the patronage system, as possessed by Jang Song Taek in the party.

From 2009 to 2011 (Fig. 3), during the time of Kim Jong Il's illness and subsequent death, was a period in which there were far fewer inspection visits than before. The circle of around Kim Jong Il did not change, however, with the most frequent appearances with the "Dear Leader" made by Kim Ki Nam, Jang Song Taek, Hyon Chol Hae, and Ri Myong Su. However, with the death of Jo Myong Rok in 2008, another General took up the position as the leading conservative in the North Korean leadership, General Kim Jong Gak. General Kim first appeared as a reported member of Kim Jong Il's entourage when the latter visited the PRC Embassy in Pyongyang in 2007. Kim Jong Gak also attended a mass games performance with the "Dear Leader" in October 2007. In August 2008, while Kim Jong Il was recovering from his stroke, Kim Jong Gak delivered another keynote speech commemorating the anniversary of Kim Jong Il's "military first" policy. Kim Jong Gak is part of a group of 2nd and 3rd Generation of North Korean leaders who have moved to the power center in the last five years. General Kim appeared on numerous occasions with Chief of the General Staff, General Ri Yong Ho. Kim was believed to be a hardliner, which is to say generally opposed to relations with the US and ROK and highly wary of the DPRK's interactions with other foreign countries.

What has happened since the death of Kim Jong Il and the ascendency of his third son Kim Jong Un to the leadership of the regime? Kim Jong Un, like his father and grandfather before him, has continued the practice of inspection tours and on the spot guidance in the first ten 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 53 inspection visits. In comparison, in the first official year of Kim Jong Il's ascendency to the mantle of leadership in 1997, he made a total of 23 inspection visits for the entire year. Thus Kim Jong Un has been quite active in first ten months of his rule. Further like his father, he first focused his attention to visits to military installations—of his first 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 instance, in the early months after his accession Kim Jong Un was reported as having conducted several inspections alone, without an accompanying entourage, to several military installations. 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.

However, since the Spring of 2012, the emphasis on military visits has declined. From April to December, 2012, Kim Jong Un inspected 36 facilities, of which 25 (69.4%) were civilian entities, primarily leisure and economic facilities (he has a particular fondness for children's parks, amusement parks, fitness centers, and department stores). 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. First, his entourages tend to be considerably larger than Kim Jong Il's (averaging 6.78 individuals compared to 4.61 for Kim Jong Il). Second, the entourages now include a large number of individuals who have unknown political inclinations, many of whom are from the newer generation of North Korean elites, and who had not appeared in the entourages of Kim Jong Il (see Fig. 4). Further, although Jang Song Taek continued to be a figure seen with Kim Jong Un, his appearances declined throughout the year. Further, Kim Ki Nam, Ri Myong Su, and Hyon Chol Hae have been marginalized. The marginalization of Ri Myong Su, who was reportedly close to Jang Song Taek, coincided with fewer appearances by Jang with Kim Jong Un.

from the Socialist Working Youth League, being its chair in 1986. When the organization was renamed the Kim Il-Sung Socialist Youth League in 1996 he became its First Secretary. In 1998 he was removed from office due to “illness”. He returned after a few years and was named Hwanghae Province Party Secretary in 2006 and was promoted to the rank of general in the Korean Peoples’ Army in 2010, although he had spent his entire career in the Party apparatus. Choe was quite close to Kim Jong Un during the leadership transition after Kim Jong Il’s death and in 2012 was made a member of the National Defense Commission and made head of the KPA General Political Bureau, and hence in charge of political supervision over the military. Choe is generally seen as part of the effort to restore party control over the military, although it was reported that there has been considerable dissatisfaction in the ranks of the military with his tenure ([North Korea Leadership Watch, 2012](#)).

4. Conclusion

Several observations can be gleaned from the above analysis. First, the above suggests that a major shift in the leadership around Kim Jong Il occurred with the introduction of economic reforms in 2002 and that again after his death and marked by the ascendancy of his son Kim Jong Un. As demonstrated above, there was a fundamental shift in the composition of the elite in the first years of the 21st century that may have resulted from the North Korean regime’s response to the Sunshine Policy of South Korea,² 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 either a real commitment to reform, or 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 the 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 re-socializing 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 circulated among the population by adopting an ill-conceived currency reform in 2009 (at a 100 to 1 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 wide-spread 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 the decade, and despite the replacement of conservatives with more pragmatic political leaders, why there has been a shift away from reform and engagement? Although one might argue that the “moderates” by reverting to policies with which they found more ideologically comfortable were really revealing their “true colors,” an alternative explanation might be that external events have compelled the North Korean leadership to move away from reform, or at least from 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 a 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 later composition of the elite was very different than the ideologically conservative elite that had surrounded Kim Jong Il in the early years of his rule. Leading military conservatives have left 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 has become much less a yardstick to measure policy than it was in the 1990s. Further, this political elite has been quite stable—that is, 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.

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 crackdowns. 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.

Under Kim Jong Un there has clearly been an influx of a cadre of younger elites in to the circle surrounding the new leader, replacing both previous prominent moderates and conservatives. A newer generation of political leaders has become more visible in the entourage surrounding the younger Kim. A key event in the consolidation of power has recently occurred with the surprising arrest and execution of Jang Song Taek at the end of 2013 for “treason.” Although in some ways this might signify and end to the trend towards more moderate internal economic policies in North Korea, this is unlikely. Given that Kim Jong Un has been surrounding himself with individuals who have made their careers in the party as opposed to the military (but who were largely unaffiliated with Jang Song Taek) would suggest a continued move toward emphasizing civilian authority and a move away from the “military first” policies of his father. It is more likely that the very public removal and execution of Jang Song Taek resulted from the effort by Kim Jong Un (and his new entourage) to eliminate a potential rival, consolidate power, and signal to conservatives that he was not merely his uncle’s pawn.

As a result of these changes, the current leader has distanced himself from both prominent conservatives and prominent moderates who populated the entourages that surrounded his father. What exactly this means in terms of policy direction, remains to be seen, and will depend a great deal upon whether there are extensive purges that follow Jang Song Taek in the party apparatus. However, the fact that Kim Jong Un current inner circle appears to include party apparatchiks as opposed to military careerists, suggests that at least the current leader is not considering returning to the “military first” policies of his father. Thus, somewhat ironically, once the ramifications of the purge and removal of Jang Song Taek have played out, the current leadership may become more receptive to a rapprochement with the West, as it develops a more credible nuclear deterrent in the future, and as Kim Jong Un seeks to strengthen the economy and the livelihood of the population (which at least appears to be an emerging priority, judging from his record of inspection visits).³

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³ Although some may believe that the purge and execution of Jang Song Taek may spell the end of reform, and it is rumored that some members of his family have also been arrested and executed (consistent with the Songbun, or the blood line practice of imprisoning those within one generation of the “criminal”), it does not strike me that the wide spread purging of “moderates” has occurred, at least yet. Indeed, some like Choe Ryong Hae, who was once considered a “protégé” of Jang Song Taek, and is in charge of political control of the military (and the point person for the move away from the “military first” policy) has had his status enhanced since the removal of Jang. Further Kim Jong Un continues to emphasize improving the economic plight of the population. This is therefore hardly a sign that a “death knell” for economic reforms has rung.