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Analysis of contributing factors behind Pyongyang's belligerent stance and threats of instability in North Korea

Análise dos fatores que contribuem para a postura belicista de Pyongyang e ameaças de instabilidade na Coreia do Norte

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RESUMO

Este artigo examina três cenários que foram amplamente antecipados com a mudança de poder na Coreia do Norte: Que a morte de Kim Jong Il levaria a uma revolta popular, como uma Revolução de Jasmin; que Kim Jong Un não conseguiria se agarrar ao poder e assim dar lugar a um golpe de palácio; e que os detentores de poder de elite em Pyongyang reuniram apoio para a Kim mais jovem e continuariam a administrar o país como ele foi dirigido por Kim Jong Il. Este artigo explica ainda por que as duas primeiras possibilidades estavam condenadas ao fracasso, e por que o último resultado provou ser o único caminho escolhido. Além disso, tendo em conta este desenvolvimento, e face aos recentes acontecimentos na Península da Coreia, há razões para suspeitar que as fissuras podem se formar a longo prazo, levando à desunião do regime e a uma possível perda de estabilidade.

Palavras-chave: China; Taiwan; Relações; Culturalista; Identidade.

JEL: K0

ABSTRACT

This article examines three scenarios that were widely anticipated to have taken place with the change in power in North Korea: That the death of Kim Jong Il would lead to a popular uprising such as a Jasmine Revolution; That Kim Jong Un would fail to hold on to power and thus give way to a palace coup; and that elite powerholders in Pyongyang would rally support for the younger Kim and continue to run the country much as it was run by Kim Jong Il. This article further explains why the former two possibilities were doomed to failure, and why the latter outcome proved to be the one road chosen. Moreover, given this development, and in the face of the recent events on the Korean Peninsula, there are reasons to suspect that fissures could form in the long run, leading to disunity of the regime and a possible loss of stability.

Keywords: North Korea, Regime Change, Jasmine Uprising, Pyongyang, Korean Stability

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1. Introduction

In the days and weeks leading up to April 15, 2016, as North Korea gears up in preparation to celebrate the birthday of the secretive regime's founder comrade Kim Il Sung, the Great Leader's grandson, President Kim Jong Un, presided over a gradually escalating series of threats—both verbal and demonstrative—against South Korea and its allies, especially the United States. North Korea has rejected calls to apologize for the 2010 sinking of the South Korean ship the *Cheonan*, loudly denounced a joint military exercise by the South and the United States, and has even released a propaganda video depicting North Korean missiles striking Washington DC. Take individually, these events seem par for the course for the hermit kingdom. Cumulatively, they reflect a growing understanding of the Western media's news cycle and a desire to stay relevant in a changing world. Moreover, they contribute to an end to speculation among Korea watchers about just what sort of leadership tack the young Kim would adopt as he settled into his position of supreme leader of the totalitarian state.

The most important relationship, through which all policy making in Taipei is filtered, is the trilateral relationship between Taipei, Beijing and Washington. The People's Republic of China (PRC) hovers ever-present over Taiwan in deliberations of legislation, trade and foreign policy in no less palpable a way than it does on the map. The only counterpoint to this enormous influence is the relationship Taipei has enjoyed with Washington, which up to the present time has helped to balance the Chinese influence and, through its policy of strategic ambiguity, provides the basis for the current tenuous status quo that defines the cross-strait situation. In Taipei, all foreign policy issues are examined through the prism of its relationship with these two giants, and as a result there can be no bilateral negotiations with other parties that don't factor in their effect on the trilateral relationship.

With the 19 December, 2011 announcement by North Korean authorities that the country's leader Kim Jong Il had died of a heart attack two days prior, countries in the region immediately mobilized in preparation for the possibility of instability in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Seoul called an emergency meeting of the national security council and placed the South Korean military on high alert, while Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of Japan immediately convened a crisis management team.² Fears of instability rapidly proved unfounded as all signs pointed to a smooth transfer of power to the late dictator's third son, Kim Jong Un, who had been hastily groomed for succession by the Korean Workers Party (KWP) since his father's health was put in doubt by a reported stroke in the summer of 2008. All fears that the dear leader's death would result in a potentially destabilizing power vacuum were quelled when it was announced that the chosen successor would lead his father's funeral procession: a sign that the powers that be endorsed the young man's ascension and would rally around their new, dear leader.

² "Kim Jong Il Death Triggers Swift Regional Reaction," *BBC News Asia*, 19 December, 2011. Web. 7 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16240371>>. 599

Fears of instability soon gave way to hope: hope that the change of helmsmen might bring with it the possibility of some degree of social or economic liberalization in the impoverished nuclear state. There was much speculation on what would come next, with most prognostications following along the lines of one of three possible scenarios:

1. The first was that the departure of the iron-fisted Kim Jong Il would lead to a popular uprising such as that seen throughout the Middle East and North Africa.
2. The second was that the young and unpractised leader at the helm would be so incapable of consolidating power that the regime would experience turbulence and instability and implode from within, giving rise to power grabs from various factions within the ruling elite in Pyongyang.
3. The third was that the ruling elite would manage to coalesce authority around Kim Jong Un, either as *de facto* ruler or figurehead.

This article presents an argument for the reasons for the failure of the first two anticipated scenarios and examines some sources of long-term instability in the DPRK, concluding that while the younger Kim seems to have consolidated his power and is holding on to the throne, his rule will be substantially different from that of either his father or grandfather, with a more collective form of governance being the result.

2. Scenario 1. Jasmine-style Uprising

The first scenario that was being breathlessly speculated upon in many initial Western media reports was that there might take place in North Korea a replay of the Jasmine revolutions and protests that spread like wildfire across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011. Besides the fact that there had been no signs emanating from the secretive country that this might transpire, and that such speculation reflects little more than the unfounded hopes of media outlets and other liberal-democratic Western institutions, there are a number of reasons why this was not a real possibility. While it is true that the Kim regime can be compared to Mubarak regime in Egypt, or those of Ghaddafi in Libya or Assad in Syria, the structural and cultural differences made this scenario, at best, extremely unlikely.

There is a significant body of work on the theoretical foundations of contentious politics covering political violence, rebellion, and revolutions, and it provides a useful lens through which to view events in the Arab world and contrast the underlying conditions there

with the situation on the ground in the DPRK. The main theoretical approaches derive from Marxism's aggregate-psychological theories and the notion of relative deprivation, and a political-conflict approach concerned with collective action, as well as Chalmers Johnson's notion of dissynchronization.

From the standpoint of McAdam *et al*, it may be counterproductive to try and transplant analyses of the Jasmine revolutions to a consideration of the possibility of their replication on the Korean peninsula. They advocate an approach to the study of revolutions that combines a search for common mechanisms and processes with knowledge of specific forms of contentious politics in specific contexts.³ In other words, concepts developed in one part of the world (usually the West) must be rigorously tested before being applied in other parts of the world, specifically in third-world countries. Instead of comparing revolutions to revolutions, civil wars to civil wars, and so on, comparisons are best made amongst the whole gamut of contentious political events, whatever their form.

Theda Skocpol uses a comparative historical method to analyze revolutions from a structural viewpoint, by incorporating an international context as well as domestic structures and processes. She defines social revolutions as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below."⁴ During a social revolution, she points out, there are concomitant changes in both social and political structure, meaning that a major component of bottom-up political revolutions necessarily entail a successful social-change component.

Looking specifically at the third world, John Foran points out that social revolutions as defined by Skocpol are actually quite rare, with very few attempts having succeeded. Part of the difficulty lies in taking power and holding it long enough to initiate a process of deep structural transformation.⁵ He identifies four interrelated contributory factors for such revolutions: dependent development; a repressive, exclusionary, personalist state; the elaboration of

³ Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, "Revolutionary Trajectories," In *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001), 193-226.

⁴ Theda Skocpol, "Explaining Social Revolutions: Alternatives to Existing Theories," In *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3-43.

⁵ John Foran, "Theorizing Revolutions," In *Taking Power: On the Origins of Third World Revolutions* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press. 2005) 5-29.

effective and powerful political cultures of resistance; and a revolutionary crisis consisting of an economic downturn and a let-up of external controls.

Taking this advice, let us consider the extent to which the conditions in North Korea contain the elements of contentious politics enumerated by the latter two theorists:

- a) Changes to the existing class structure;
- b) Dependent development;
- c) A personalist state;
- d) Political culture of resistance; and
- e) A revolutionary crisis.

a) With a class structure controlled as rigidly by the state as North Korea's is, the revolutionary mechanism described by Skocpol would be extremely unlikely to materialize, and a social-change component encompassing changes to the existing class structure is extremely unlikely to coalesce. Some conditions are in alignment with the three examples in her study: Like pre-revolutionary France, Russia, and China, today's North Korea is unable to meet the challenges of a changing world, and it is held together by an autocratic pseudo-monarchy with the dual aim of maintaining internal order and dealing with external enemies.

In these states, however, the existence of a powerful, landed upper class presented a viable counter-influence to the absolute rule of the monarchy, and the two were forced to work hand-in-hand to control the peasantry in a highly antagonistic partnership: the aristocracy constantly undermined monarchical power to its own benefit, bestowing the monarchy just enough power to survive, and hence leaving it weak enough to be overthrown.

North Korea lacks a parallel class structure, and hence there exists no aristocracy to challenge the all-powerful state. Instead, there has been a state-imposed caste structure defining society along rigid lines since 1958, based entirely on levels of loyalty to the Kim regime. Kim Il Sung referred to the program in a speech he delivered in 1970 at the fifth Korean

Workers' Party Congress, revealing that the population had been effectively divided into three categories of "loyalty groups."⁶

Approximately one-fourth of the population makes up the core class (*haeksim kyechung*), who are entitled to better access to amenities such as health care, housing and food. These are members of families that were soldiers, workers, and certain types of farmers prior to the establishment of the regime, and those whose ancestors gave their lives in the war of liberation. Below this, the wavering class (*tong'yo kyechung*) makes up about half of the population. Before 1945, their ancestors were merchants, service workers, and immigrants from China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as people who had family members leave for South Korea.

Next is the hostile class (*joktae kyechung*), made up of the descendents of wealthy merchants and landlords from the pre-liberation period, as well as anyone reported as having expressed dissatisfaction with the regime. Informers for the Ministry of People's Security monitors all the citizens of North Korea looking for offenses such as expressions of discontent, or even people damaging photos of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il in newspapers or books by folding them—an act that is considered illegal.⁷ The *joktae kyechung* receive the least food, and the lowest-quality housing and jobs, and are banned from living in the capital, but there remains a class even below this, made up of the estimated 250,000 prisoners of the vast North Korean gulag system. Pyongyang follows a practice of family purge (*yongoje*), meaning that it is not only persons convicted of crimes that get banished or sent to the prison camps, but three generations of their families, and in some cases, friends and colleagues as well.

By controlling the social division of class and organizing them by levels of loyalty to the regime, Kim Il Sung effectively eliminated a threat to his absolute control, and removed one of the necessary conditions for revolutionary action as defined by Skocpol.

⁶ Oh Kong Dan, *North Korea Through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000)

⁷ Lee Joon-Woon, "Chongjin's Suseongchun River is Covered with Floating 100 and 1,000 Won Bills of the Old Currency Printed with 'Kim Il Sung's Face'," *Open Radio for North Korea*, August 3, 2009.

b) The importance of dependent development as a precursor to revolution is stated by Foran, and defined by Peter Evans as implying the accumulation of capital and a degree of industrialization on the periphery. Dependency is characterized by an alliance of local and international capital that, along with the state, forms a triumvirate of forces promoting development.⁸ In the DPRK, what methods of production that still exist are controlled entirely by the state, and while there have been recent attempts to revive the economy with the assistance of the country's primary benefactor (China), it does not fit the category of dependent development.

The North Korean economy defies simple categorization, or indeed, rational explanation. It was once an industrial powerhouse that enjoyed a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) than that of South Korea until 1974. Today, the government is unable to feed its own people or provide electricity to light its cities. Besides what enters in the form of international aid, the regime makes money by selling the country's natural resources, including mineral resources and fishing rights to China, as well as by selling cheap labour, in the form of workers felling trees in Russia or staffing factories near the South Korean border. These and a few other legal enterprises (including a niche specialty making monuments for African dictators) netted the regime an estimated US\$2 billion in 2009.⁹ Much of the remainder of the country's economy is based on illegal ventures.

One such interest is drugs. In the 1980s, the government ran hidden poppy fields and used ostensibly empty factories to process the harvest into opium, which it would then smuggle through China to foreign markets. Today, opium has given way to methamphetamine production and export, with the same basic business model and distribution lines intact. Another business line is counterfeit United States currency, which too is smuggled out through China. The bogus US\$100 bills, called super-notes, are exchanged with Chinese business partners for \$60 per note and then distributed internationally.

Finally, there is the trade in weapons and weapons technology, including the alleged illicit sales of missile and nuclear technology to rogue states. While it is difficult to determine exactly when North Korea began cooperating on nuclear technology and delivery systems with Pakistan, for example, the two have had a relationship in the conventional arms trade for

⁸ Peter B. Evans, *Dependent Development: The Alliance of Multinational, State, and Local Capital in Brazil* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1979)

⁹ Robert Smith, and Zoe Chace, "Drug Dealing, Counterfeiting, Smuggling: How North Korea Makes Money," *National Public Radio*, August 11, 2011.

over three decades. The DPRK began selling ballistic missiles and technology in the 1980s, at about the same time that Pakistan began producing highly enriched uranium at its Khan Research Laboratory. In 1993, following a visit to Pyongyang by then-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, cooperation on missile technology intensified between the two countries.¹⁰ There are several countries which allegedly operate North Korean ballistic missiles, either bought as such or after receiving assistance to establish local production facilities. These include, but are not restricted to, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

All in all, it is impossible to estimate the yield of North Korea's various illicit enterprises, but very little goes into the growth of the economy. Most of the proceeds from the counterfeiting and drug operations go directly to Office 39, which is a shadowy agency that managed the personal slush fund of Kim Jong Il, now presumably to the benefit of Kim Jong Un. After a five-month period during which he had disappeared from public view, Office 39 head Jon Il-chun reappeared in public on a state television network broadcast just days before the leader's death, in which he was seen accompanying Kim Jong Il and his son on an inspection tour of a Pyongyang retail facility.¹¹

While it would be an overstatement to say that the entire North Korean economy is geared towards the personal benefit of the Dear Leader, it is in no way capable of inducing the mechanism described by Foran in which third world economies enjoy a rapid period of growth that leads to inflation, debt, and growing inequality. Indeed, many of the yardsticks by which we conventionally measure these concepts are not adequate to the task in a North Korean context.

c) The Kim regime's reliance on a repressive, exclusionary, personalist state strategy is one that follows a uniquely North Korean approach to venerating the absolute or great leader (*suryong*) as more than just an administrator, but one who represents the heart and brain of the nation, of which the people make up the body. Scholars have pointed out, however, that *suryong*, though it shares similarities with the Emperor system in operation in WWII Japan, incorporates an ideological component as well. This ideology is expressed as *Juche*, which is

¹⁰ Sharon A. Squassoni, "Weapons of Mass Destruction: Trade Between North Korea and Pakistan," *CRS Report for Congress*, March 11, 2004.

¹¹ "N. Korean Leader's Slush Fund Manager Reappears in Public," *Yonhap News Agency*, December 19, 2011. Web. 7 Feb. 2012.
<<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2011/12/19/82/0401000000AEN20111219001400315F.HTML>>.

an extreme form of autarky in state control.¹² Although it has been promoted since the mid-1950s, *Juche* became the state ideology in 1972 when it was promulgated as such in the North Korean Constitution. It therefore presents a complication to the reckoning of North Korea as a personalist state.

The philosophy was renamed Kim Il Sungism (*Kim Il Sung Chuui*) by Kim Jong Il in the 1970s, and by the 1980s had eclipsed all other philosophical schools of thought, with even Marxism and Leninism having all but disappearing from party literature.¹³ Although the figure of the great leader represents the embodiment of *Juche*, the widespread dissemination of the state ideology essentially removes the individual from centrality and ensures that his leadership and paternal legacy take center stage. Moreover, Foran himself admits that many a personalistic leader is not overthrown, citing as examples Kim Il Sung, as well as Taiwan's Chiang Kai-shek.

d) An effective and powerful political culture of resistance is absent in modern North Korea. Save for the war of independence, which was very much predicated upon racial distinctions and not regime type, ideology, or administrative competence, there has never been a culture of resistance in this society. Even its road to communism differed from other states that followed that path, mostly due to the fact that heavy industry had not developed very far in Korea during the time of the Japanese occupation, and as a result the traditional Marxist concept of the proletarian class struggle had little resonance for North Koreans, as they had never experienced a period of capitalism beyond what elements thereof existed during the period of Japanese colonial occupation, which preceded the 1945 Liberation. Even the degree to which the period of People's Democracy, which coincided with the sweeping nationalisation of industries (1946-1958), can be called real "capitalism," is open to interpretation. Either way, the majority of the population in contemporary North Korea were born after the communisation of the entire society. Kim Il Sung used the earliest iterations of *Juche* as a means of reinterpreting Marxism-Leninism in a way that suited this unique North Korean reality—an act considered heresy in the eyes of committed Soviet Marxists. Early attempts to export the ideology failed, so specifically was it tailored to the North Korean situation.¹⁴

¹² Hyung Gu Lynn, *Bipolar Orders: The Two Koreas since 1989* (Halifax: Fernwood Pub. 2007)

¹³ Rhee Sang-Woo, "North Korea in 1991: Struggle to Save Chuch'e Amid Signs of Change," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 1 (January 1992): 56-63.

¹⁴ Paul French, *North Korea: the Paranoid Peninsula - A Modern History* (London: Zed Books Ltd. 2007)

Without an owner class upon which to heap their enmity, or a capitalist system to overthrow, the North Korean people were ushered into the communist world without the memory, and hence the powerful symbolism, of a class struggle between workers and capitalists in their society—a struggle that is at the very heart of Marxist concepts. Hence Kim followed the Soviet example of establishing collective farms as a means of proletarianizing the North Korean peasants, and as a result differences between workers and peasants continued to exist even after the revolution's socialist phase.

Indeed, even in their pre-revolutionary history, the people of North Korea have never known freedom, and there exists today no civil society that could oppose the current regime. Nor are there any institutions that might foment the accretion of such a civil society, as the Catholic Church accomplished in Poland, the ethnic minority population in Romania and Hungary, the workers of East Germany, or the intellectuals in Czechoslovakia.¹⁵ North Korea contains no parallels to these institutions and groups.

e) An economic downturn and a let-up of external controls has proved equally unlikely to lead to a revolutionary crisis. The reaction of the North Korean people to economic hardship need not be theorized, as this is exactly what transpired in the late 1990s when an estimated 5 percent of the population starved to death, with the survivors subsisting on tree bark and grass. Instead of the citizenry rising up in protest, the complete control that the government wields over information and its extreme isolation from the outside world had created a populace completely incapable of considering, much less mounting, a rebellion, so accustomed were they to conditions of extreme poverty.¹⁶ Indeed, the best way to survive such conditions is to join the system and become, as far as is possible, a trusted follower of the elite.

A side effect of the sustained famine that mitigates against any possible uprising is that it has created a physically weak population, especially among members of the hostile class; Based on a survey of 6,000 North Korean households, the country's children are experiencing major health problems including, but not confined to, stunting and wasting.¹⁷ This is

¹⁵ Charles K. Armstrong, *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy, and the State* (London: Routledge, 2003)

¹⁶ Young Whan Kihl, "North Korea's Foreign Relations: Diplomacy of Promotive Adaptation," *East Asia* 10, no. 3 (September 1991): 30-45.

¹⁷ Daniel J. Hoffman, and Soo-Kyung Lee, "The Prevalence of Wasting, but Not Stunting, Has Improved in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," *The Journal of Nutrition* 135 (March 2005): 452-456.

due largely to the poor state of nutrition that is a result of global isolation and national military spending that exceeds 20 percent of GDP. It has been reported that the prevalence of stunting in North Korea was 39.6 percent among boys and 36.8 percent among girls.¹⁸ Even assuming that the citizenry were to become so disaffected as to attempt rebellion, there is little chance that such a physically weakened and stunted group could defeat the state's standing army of 1.2 million men, as well as a further 5 million reservists,¹⁹ all of whom are reasonably well-fed and committed through their conditioning to revere and defend the Kim regime.

The conditions enumerated by theorists on contentious politics as being the precursors for forms of violence, rebellion and revolution are conspicuously absent in North Korea, but there were several characteristics of the Arab uprisings that were unique to today's world and the technology that enables instant communication and organization, which many observers have credited for being almost wholly responsible for the Jasmine revolutions. While one may argue with the degree to which this is true, one thing is certain: The use of Internet-enabled communications in the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa highlighted the central role that information technology plays in provoking dissent today. These, too, are absent in the DPRK.

While much has been made of the Great Firewall of China and the extent to which Beijing controls the content that Chinese citizens can see on the Internet, it is nothing compared to the degree to which Pyongyang controls and manipulates the information coming in from the outside world. Communications over such social networking sites as Facebook and Twitter allowed protestors in the Middle East and North Africa to dialogue with one another as they organized rallies and warned each other about the location of government troops, while simultaneously communicating with the outside world about conditions in their countries and receiving all-important information from the outside about how their plight was being followed by sympathetic forces in the international community. These tools are simply not available in the Hermit Kingdom.

While there are a large number of computers in North Korea, none are connected to the Internet (save those of the ruling elite), and all radios are hardwired to receive only the

¹⁸ Judit Katona-Apte, and A. Mokdad, "Malnutrition of Children in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea," *The Journal of Nutrition* 128 (August 1998): 1315-1319

¹⁹ Jim Garamone, "Commander Assesses North Korea's Conventional Threat," *American Forces Press Service*, August 26, 2005.

official government broadcasts. Although this is changing slowly, with a limited nationwide intranet system called *Kwangmyong*, it remains strictly controlled and unable to tap information from the outside world.

Even the estimated 800,000 registered mobile-phone subscribers are incapable of making overseas calls, and they have their communications regularly monitored by the government, making it next to impossible for potential dissidents to use text-based services to organize the sort of people-power protests employed widely throughout the Philippines, for example. What little information manages to slip into the country does so through smuggled DVDs and videotapes from South Korea, as well as illicit mobile phones which can access the Chinese cellular networks that spill over the border.²⁰

It is perhaps illustrative of the inadequacy of modern technology to convey information into the DPRK that one of the most effective means thus far has been to go low-tech: South Koreans sent in news about the Arab uprisings on printed leaflets, proclaiming “A dictatorial regime is destined to collapse.”²¹ These were sent aloft individually attached to balloons and allowed to drift slowly into the North. It has even been reported that 10,000 DVD copies of the film that made international headlines in December 2014, *The Interview*, in which Seth Rogan and James Franco play media personalities enlisted by the CIA to assassinate Kim Jong Un, were to be dropped into the DPRK by balloons launched by activists in the south. Unfortunately, these propaganda balloons largely fail to reach a wide audience, and their use only raises the risk of heightening tensions between Pyongyang and Seoul.

Given the almost watertight control over information, the citizenry has very little knowledge about events and ways of life outside their borders, is barely aware of the concept of freedom, and is completely unable to communicate even with one another in forms and fashions that are not micromanaged by the state. Moreover, aside from certain non-mainstream groups in South Korea, there is very little interest among the international community in supporting, even covertly, such a rebellion the way the uprising in Libya gained widespread international help in the form of aid, weapons, advisors, and even air support by Western militaries as the rebels sought to unseat Ghaddafi.

²⁰ “Twitter-less North Korea crafts new cult of Kim,” *Agence France-Presse*, December 27, 2011. Web. 7 Feb. 2012. <<http://au.news.yahoo.com/a/-/technology/12461048/twitter-less-north-korea-crafts-new-cult-of-kim/>>.

²¹ Jonathan Fried, “North Korea’s Jasmine Revolution?” *Penn Political Review* 7, no. 3 (May 2011): 20-21.

Even if there were an organized opposition, or a budding protest movement, in existence in North Korea to receive such external support, the only powers capable of providing it, the United States and China, remain unlikely to foment such rebellion either covertly or otherwise as they each have a vested interest in maintaining the geopolitical *status quo*. According to the views of security analysts in the two countries, such instability risks increasing uncertainties in regional security and causing problems, both diplomatic and domestic, for the two powers. Thus there has developed an almost obsessive preoccupation with maintaining the stability of the Kim regime.

Prior to Kim Jong Il's death, the administration of US President Barack Obama had just recently resumed negotiations with North Korea on the provision of food aid, and had been hoping for positive signs from the North that would allow the six-party denuclearization talks to eventually resume. This would be seen as a foreign-relations victory for Obama, whose record on foreign policy had thus far been poor. Moreover, Washington is concerned about what forces might gain control of the plutonium and other fissile material and weapons technology possessed by the DPRK should Kim Jong Un's succession be contested.²² Such instability would risk conflagrating into a region-wide conflict—an outcome Washington is desperate to avoid. Thus, the most prudent path for the Obama administration is to shore up the stability of the Kim regime in any way it can.

This foreign-policy calculus is similar to that of Beijing. Unlike in 1956, when China supported the efforts of North Korea's *Yan'an* faction to stage a coup against Kim Il Sung during the plenum of the Central Committee of the KWP²³, there is very little interest in Beijing for the sudden removal of the Kim regime at this time. For one thing, China fears this would result in a flood of Korean refugees—with some estimates as high as 20 million displaced persons—across the Yalu River and into China, which Beijing claims that it does not have the infrastructure nor the finances to handle. Some analysts claim this is simply an excuse, however, and that China could easily accommodate such an influx.

Another reason often cited for why China resists any impulse to suborn regime change is that it fears encirclement by America, and such an event would risk a reunification of the Korean peninsula, putting an ally of the United States on China's doorstep. Although a more

²² Andrew Quinn, "Analysis: Kim Death Complicates Obama's N. Korea Nuclear Quandary," *Reuters*, December 19, 2011.

²³ Christoph Bluth, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2011)

nuanced analysis, as well as several cables that emerged in the infamous Wikileaks dump, reveals that this eventuality may not be such anathema to Beijing, experts point out that there is a defining indecisiveness about the Korean question in Zhongnanhai and that policy is driven more by inertia than by sensitivity to its own national interests.²⁴

Proof of China's goal of stability and blessing of the choice of successor can be seen in the fact that China's then-leader, Hu Jintao, wasted no time in visiting the North Korean embassy in Beijing, along with a delegation of eight other top Chinese officials, to deliver condolences on the death of Kim Jong Il.²⁵ Chinese policy is clearly to do what it can to maintain the stability of the Kim regime, and no attempts to foster regime change without China's consent, even tacit, are likely to succeed: North Korea's fate, like its economy, is controlled by China, and only Beijing has the power to allow the North Korean state to collapse. For whatever reason, they are not willing to use it.²⁶

In sum, there was little evidence that any sort of bottom-up revolution or even regime change would be likely to take place as the younger Kim consolidated his grip on the machinery of the North Korean state. The population of the hermitic kingdom, ignorant of the realities of the world outside their borders, have become acclimated to poverty, fear and oppression over the generations and ill-equipped to mount a revolt. Likewise, foreign powers do not have the will to support such an action.

3. Scenario 2. Internal Power Grabs

While the odds of a populist-based revolution have long been slim to nil, there are many arguments for why conditions in Pyongyang might lead to instability and power grabs from among the higher echelons of the ruling elite now that the relatively inexperienced Kim Jong Un is in power. While many of these may seem convincing at first blush, the nature of power politics in Pyongyang militates against such an outcome. First and foremost of these is the younger Kim's age and his relative inexperience with the affairs of state.

²⁴ Zhu Feng, "China's North Korean Contradictions," *Project Syndicate*, December 2, 2010.

²⁵ Choe Sang-Hun, "Son Among Mourners as North Korea's Kim Lies in State," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2011.

²⁶ Jonathan Fried, "North Korea's Jasmine Revolution?" *Penn Political Review* 7, no. 3 (May 2011): 20-21.

When Kim's grandfather and North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung, died in 1994, he was succeeded by a son that had benefited from an estimated two decades of grooming and experience leading various state organs, including much of the military structure, as well as those bodies responsible for propaganda operations in the media and the arts. In contrast, Kim Jong Un was revealed to the world as heir apparent approximately a year prior to his ascension, and had no known political or administrative experience.

For there to be the risk of a power grab, there have to be individuals who could conceivably stand in opposition to Kim Jong Un. There are very few personalities that fit that description that are still alive today in the North. There are powerful individuals, to be sure: recently-retired Prime Minister Choe Yong Rim; Kim Young Nam, the head of state; Kim Jong Il's sister Kim Kyong Hui; and the recently dismissed Vice Marshal Ri Yong Ho.²⁷ None, however, had the independent clout to successfully draw support and loyalty away from Kim Jong Un and from his father's desires for the future of the nation. The one candidate that appeared to have enough power to accomplish this, should he have chosen that path, was Jang Song Taek, Kim Jong Il's brother-in-law and a member of the Politburo.

After Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in 2008 and appeared to be hastily making plans for the leadership succession, the once-purged and later rehabilitated Jang rose to prominence in a manner that led analysts to conclude that he would serve as a regent of sorts to the younger Kim. Speculation was rife that Jang, and to some degree his wife, the aforementioned Kim Kyong Hui—both of whom quickly received high-profile positions within the party and military—would become the true power behind the throne. Even prior to his purge and assassination, which was covered breathlessly in the Western media, there quickly arose signs that pointed to political infighting and a distancing of Jang from the inner circle.²⁸ One was his aforementioned position relatively low on the roster of Kim Jong Il's funeral committee. Another was the apparent rift with General O Kuk Ryol, vice chairman of the National Defense Commission.

Prior to the power transition, O's fortunes were likewise on the wane, with no position in the Party Central Committee's Political Bureau or the Central Military Commission, and there were reports in 2011 of purges among a cadre of officers loyal to O.²⁹ This despite seven decades of loyalty to the Kim family. Still, O was apparently chosen by Kim Jong Il to help guide Kim Jong Un after the transition, and South Korean analysts believed O could rally support in the event that there is discon-

²⁷ Ruediger Frank, "The Party as the Kingmaker: The Death of Kim Jong Il and its Consequences for North Korea," *38 North*, December 21, 2011.

²⁸ Bill Powell, "Kim Jong Il's Death: North Korea Waits for Kim Jong Un to Consolidate Power," *Time World*, 19 December, 2011.

²⁹ Michael Madden, "Gen. O Kuk Ryol Steps Forth From the Shadows," *North Korea Leadership Watch*, December 26, 2011.

tent with the performance of Kim Jong Un.³⁰ It became clear that the stability of the nation was dependent upon both O and Jang remaining committed to the budding regime of the younger Kim, and yet there were whispers of a rift between the two men, with not a few analysts predicting that Jang might follow the historical precedent set by the 15th century Choson King Sejo. Sejo was Grand Prince to his nephew King Danjong but he usurped the throne from the young and inexperienced monarch. Until his assassination, this possibility doubtless hung over Kim's head like the sword of Damocles: Jang was charismatic and had strong ties to the upper echelons of power in North Korea: he was rumoured to have been favoured by China as Kim Jong Il's successor, and he was believed to personally enjoy the limelight, having already been purged once, back in 2003, for hosting social gatherings as elaborate as the Dear Leader's own: an act of Hubris in Pyongyang society.

However widely reported, in reality such rifts were a far cry from visible fractures in the regime, and the consolidation of Kim Jong Un's power proceeded in a stable fashion. Thus, despite strong arguments for why the younger Kim might have a more difficult time consolidating support than his father did, it remains unlikely that the North Korean state will descend into power struggle and chaos, at least in the immediate future. A fact that is underappreciated in most conceptions, imperfect though our information is, about the inner workings of the DPRK is that it is not a one-man show, and the presence of so many power holders is the rule, rather than the exception. The decision-making procedure in Pyongyang combines a manner of consensus-forming among various interest groups within and among the party, the military, and the organs of the state, with various factions espousing sometimes contradictory opinions on such issues as security, the economy, and foreign relations.³¹ This was true in the days of founder Kim Il Sung, as well as during Kim Jong Il's tenure, and neither man could rule by fiat without gaining the cooperation of, or at least consulting, such agencies as the military and the party's Central Committee.

Moreover, the collective decision-making that takes place is not without disagreements on courses of action, as is the case in any governance structure; however it is rare that they cause such friction as to create fissures within the regime. For one thing, such fissures would be a sign of exploitable weakness to the many outside forces that are perceived to be constantly probing for such divisions in the hopes of fomenting regime change. Since the current collection of power holders in Pyongyang are acutely aware that their chances of surviving any form of coup d'état would be minimal, it is in their best interests to maintain cohesion and support the Kim regime fully and completely.³²

³⁰ Tetsuya Hakoda, "All Eyes Set on Kim Jong Il's Funeral Committee List," *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 27, 2011.

³¹ Paul French, *North Korea: the Paranoid Peninsula - A Modern History* (London: Zed Books Ltd. 2007)

³² Alexander Vorontsov, "North Korea After Kim Jong Il," 38 *North*, December 28, 2011.

It is therefore no surprise that, despite the predictions of certain Western-based prognosticators, the younger Kim obtained the support of these power holders. For one thing, the influential military and intelligence apparatus appears to be fully backing the young leader, especially given recent hostile actions perpetrated and threatened at the South. Moreover, even early on, state-run media began referring to Kim Jong Un with the monikers usually reserved for his father, including “supreme leader of the armed forces,” “the pre-eminent Leader of the party, the state, and the military,” and his most famous title, “Dear Leader.” Even Kim Jong Il’s carefully-worded obituary referred to his heir as “outstanding leader of the party, the military, and the people.” This is strong evidence that the Kim Jong Un faction consolidated support for his assumption of absolute control over the party, military, and state.

Before his demise, the canny Kim Jong Il had been working to lay the foundations for this by gradually restoring the party’s primacy over the military, which had grown increasingly—and dangerously—influential over previous years through the creeping expansion of the military-first policy, or *Sŏn’gun*. Evidence for the success of this manoeuvring can be gleaned from the relative ranking of the individuals on Kim Jong Il’s funeral committee, with the most prestigious positions filled by members of the party.³³

Kim Jong Un was followed by the president of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim Yong Nam. The standing committee of the party’s Central Committee politburo topped the list and was followed in turn by members of the politburo itself, its candidate members, and those in the Central Committee—all of whom preceded the members of the military, with the exception of those serving officers who attended the lineup in their capacity as high-ranking party members. Jang Song Taek was listed 19th.

By returning to core values and adopting a party-first policy with Choi Yong Hae in control, as well as by placing Ri Young Ho in control of the military, the elder Kim laid the foundations for his son’s consolidation of power and averted any temptation by an overly powerful military complex, as well as by Jang Song Taek personally, to oppose the succession. In this manner, Kim ensured that Jang, perhaps the third most powerful man in North Korea after the two Kims, would support Kim Jong Un after he was named successor.

In order to continue to benefit from the apparent unflagging support from the various stakeholders in the Kim regime, it was essential for Kim Jong Un to avoid any missteps that might cast doubt on his competence to rule. One of the most difficult tasks was to manage relations with the out-

³³ Tetsuya Hakoda, “All Eyes Set on Kim Jong Il’s Funeral Committee List,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 27, 2011.

side world in a manner that consistent with that of his father, and all signs on this front point to an auspicious performance, relatively speaking.

In conclusion, expectations that Pyongyang's power elite would contest the ascension of Kim Jong Un in some way proved to be chimerical, giving way rather to a coalescing in a show of support and loyalty to the regime, at least thus far. In terms of foreign and domestic policy, there has been little major departure from the policies enacted by the elder Kim—indeed, these policies and tactics have been pushed to the very limit—as part of this consolidation process naturally entailed Kim Jong Un proving his loyalty to his father and demonstrating the continuity of his legacy throughout the transition period. This is the genesis of what we are witnessing today.

4. Threats to stability

The continued period of power consolidation is being expressed through the maintenance of a hard-line stance on both foreign and domestic policy. Even as the younger Kim attempted to buy the affections of the North Korean populace through small gestures, such as giving the order to provide food and warming huts for people mourning his late father, the carrot is useless without the stick: Forced confessions and harsh punishments have been levied against mourners whose expressions of grief over the father's passing was inadequate, and the son began purging those deemed to have mourned unconvincingly. Nor was the purge confined to the general population, but the party and military as well.³⁴ The net result is a palpable fear of being purged hanging over the heads of North Koreans.

Shoring up the power base of Kim Jong Un in those early days appeared to be the immediate goal and primary focus in Pyongyang. Nevertheless, there are underlying conditions that could prove to be disruptive to the unity of the Kim regime in the long term. Even on the part of foreign powers, the immediate concern is to emerge from this potentially tumultuous period with the current power structure intact, and while this may seem at odds with the principles of good governance and a principled foreign policy, it is the hope of foreign powers that slowly, gradually, a younger generation of North Korean Communist leaders will emerge and decide to turn to the Chinese model of dictatorship: iron-fisted control over information and brutal suppression of dissent, yes; but mixed with economic liberalization. Western nations, still operating under a belief in modernization theory, anticipate that this is the least painful path to an eventual political liberalization.

For this path to become a feasible reality, it must be accomplished in such a way that Beijing supports the move, so therefore it cannot be construed as a threat to China's own continued growth. In

³⁴ Donald Kirk, "Fear Reigns as Jong-Eun Stamps Authority," *Asia Times Online*, January 4, 2012.

the past, China has pulled back its support for similar initiatives when they proved threatening to the Chinese economy. If forward motion in this area is to be accomplished, Beijing must calculate that the need to maintain stability in the DPRK must outweigh the economic risk posed by cracking the door to liberalization of the North Korean economy. Ironically, the more effectively Kim Jong Un strengthens his power base, the more secure the Chinese will be in deciding to withhold support for any such expansion of legitimate industry deemed to be competitive.

On the domestic front, Kim's rule is greatly determined by the enormous influences coming from his inner circle of handlers, mentors and peers, and these influences contain the seeds of instability in the long-term. Primary among those influential personalities was Jang, who may or may not have had designs on the throne prior to his execution. National Defense Commission Deputy Chairman Jang Song Taek is believed to have been the prime architect of the succession framework and Kim Jong Un's strongest supporter, and yet even he was not immune from the purge.³⁵

It was the charismatic Jang who was charged with overseeing the 2008 government crackdown on private markets operating within the DPRK, and jailing or executing the party and state officials involved. The fact that this initiative was revived after the death of Kim Jong Il is an indication that Jang wielded considerable influence in policymaking, with many calling him the power behind the throne. This is not surprising in a culture with deep Confucian roots which render it unlikely that the upper echelons of the military establishment should willingly follow a leader many decades their junior. (Kim Jong Il was already in his 50s when he assumed the throne, and had several decades of political experience and preparation, putting his supporters in place before his own coronation.) This is not to say that the old guard will deviate from their support for Kim Jong Un, only that they will be more likely to do so if they believe that one of their own is pulling his strings: Jang's brothers Jang Song Woo and Jang Song Gil, both now deceased, were high-level military officers, and despite his occasional purge, Jang himself had been part of the inner circle for decades.

Together, Jang and his wife (and Kim Jong Il's sister) Kim Kyong Hui were known as North Korea's "power Couple." Like Jang, Kim holds senior posts in the armed forces, and they were reported to have been involved in purging, and even killing, their political enemies in the past.³⁶ Her appointment to the rank of four-star general in 2010 at the same time as Kim Jong Un, despite neither of them having had any military experience, was a signal that the Kim family would attempt to maintain its centrality in any post-Kim Jong Il DPRK. While reports of her brutality and alcoholism are impossible to confirm,³⁷ many North Korea watchers believe her ascent was engineered by her brother as a

³⁵ Son Won-Je, "Uncle Jang Song Taek Alleged Mentor and Rival of Kim Jong-Un for Power in N. Korea," *The Hankyoreh*, December 21, 2011.

³⁶ Philip Shenon, "Inside North Korea's First Family: Rivals to Kim Jong-un's Power," *The Daily Beast*, December 19, 2011.

³⁷ Philip Shenon, "North Korea's 'Evil' Sister," *The Daily Beast*, September 28, 2010.

means of ensuring the first family's continued legacy.³⁸ Despite the December 2013 purge and execution of her husband, Kim survived the purge and is believed to continue to hold a position in the inner circle.

When Kim Jong Il was preparing to assume power from his father, he did so, in part, by gradually replacing thousands of party officials with younger members. These newly promoted members of Kim's own generation were grateful, and therefore more loyal, than the older cohort whom they had replaced.³⁹ If the younger Kim decides to take a page from his father's book, then we can expect to see advancement on the part of members of the third generation of North Korean leaders: The so-called *Ponghwajo*, or "Torch Group." This group is made up of the sons of high-ranking North Korean officials, mostly in their thirties, who are graduates of elite schools such as Kim Il Sung University and Pyongyang Foreign Languages University and who mostly hold positions in high-level state offices such as the DPRK's security and intelligence bodies and legal supervisory organs.⁴⁰

Kim Jong Un himself is a member of this clique, becoming one upon his return from school in Switzerland. The leaders of the clique are O Se won, whose father is General O Kuk Ryol, and Kim Chol, son of General Kim Won Hong, whose status among the ruling elite is evident in his position in Kim Jong Il's funeral committee. Other members include the sons of Vice Premier Kang Sok Ju and former ambassador to Switzerland Ri Chol. They are reportedly dedicated to helping Kim Jong Un consolidate power and thus are presumably expecting to take their places among the ruling elite. Interestingly, O Se Won is reportedly head of the Foreign Trading Corporation, and in fact an estimated half of the children of high-ranking military and party officials seem to have chosen careers in diplomacy and trade—fields that necessitate interaction with the outside world. Their attraction to these fields could signal a predisposition to increased engagement with the international community should this generation acquire an increased say in policymaking.

They are also, like their Chinese "Princeling" counterparts, leveraging their connections, relative immunity, and elevated positions to access moneymaking opportunities, which in North Korea are primarily illicit. The *Ponghwajo* is known to deal in counterfeiting and drug trafficking, with O Se Won involved in an incident in which a ship operated by the Pong Su Shipping Co., (an entity controlled by the Korean Workers Party) made a botched attempt to smuggle 125 kilograms of heroin into Australia.⁴¹ In addition to dealing in drugs, the young *Ponghwajo* members are known to be avid drug

³⁸ Nicholas Hamisevicz, "10 People You Need to Know for Transition in North Korea," *The Peninsula*, December 19, 2011.

³⁹ David Wallechinsky, "Kim Jong Il – North Korea," In *Tyrants: The World's 20 Worst Living Dictators* (New York: Regan, 2006), 33-52.

⁴⁰ Michael Rank, "The Ponghwa Behind Pyongyang's Throne," *Asia Times Online*, January 19, 2012.

⁴¹ Benjamin Habib, "North Korea's Basketcase Economy is Built on Drugs, Weapons and Fakes," *The Conversation*, December 21, 2011.

users as well, with the group sometimes referred to as a narcotics club. Their newfound proximity to power with Kim Jong Un's elevation will likely lead to an escalation of their illicit businesses and upward mobility among the ranks. If so, analysts predict this will anger second-generation officials and members of the general population, exacerbating existing criticisms of the *Ponghwajo*'s abuse of privilege and causing fractures within the regime.⁴²

While the current spate of hardline domestic crackdowns are a continuation of some of Kim Jong Il's policies put on hiatus after his stroke, such as the dismantling of previously tolerated private markets, their revival at the current time betrays an insecurity on the part of not just the young and inexperienced leader, but of his regency team as well. Only once this insecurity has been assuaged and the Kim Jong Un faction is secure in its position will it begin to assert itself in autonomous policy initiatives.

Nothing substantial is known about Kim Jong Un's beliefs or what policies he might be likely to champion, although much has been made of his days in Liebefeld, Switzerland, where he attended the state-run, German-speaking Hessgut Schule, and later the Steinholtz middle school, using the alias Pak Un.⁴³ During that period from 1998 to 2000, he was exposed to the realities of life in the outside world, especially among the affluent children of the Western elite.⁴⁴ Many analysts reckon this experience will influence the direction his rule will take.

Analysts in the West would do well to stay alert for certain signals. For one thing, the Kim Jong Un regime may attempt to gradually shift the ideological focus of Kim Il Sungism—what used to be called *Juche*—to a position more adaptive to this eventuality. This fanatical self-reliance philosophy is an ideological impediment to increased trade with other nations, and Kim Jong Il often cited its centrality in his refusal to embrace Chinese-style economic liberalization in the past. Given time, the new leader (or his minders) will doubtless be tempted to tiptoe down this path, but the first step, and signal to Korea watchers, will be official pronouncements either de-emphasizing or re-imagining the *Juche* concept.

Other signals will be in the popular representation of father and grandfather. This lineage is the hereditary legacy justifying the new Dear Leader's authority, as it derives primarily from the font of all North Korean life: the Great Leader Kim Il Sung. Thus any change will have to be accomplished by invoking Kim Il Sung's name and reviving (at least nominally) his policies. It is not coincidence that tensions begin in April, during preparations for celebrating the birthday of the regime's founder.

⁴² Kim Yoon-Mi, "Children of N. Korea Power Elite Take Key Posts," *Asia News Network*, January 1, 2012.

⁴³ Colin Freeman, and Philip Sherwell, "North Korea Leadership: 'My happy Days at School With North Korea's Future Leader'," *The Telegraph*, September 26, 2010.

⁴⁴ Bill Powell, "A New North Korea: Could Kim Jong Un Liberate His Nation's Economy?" *Time Magazine*, December 20, 2011.

Indeed, Korea hands can expect the younger Kim to eventually begin invoking his grandfather more than his father, in dealings with the people as well as the elite as much as possible, as he consolidates his rule. It is not for nothing that Kim Jong Un has often been said to physically resemble his grandfather: this resemblance is already being leveraged, with the younger Kim gaining weight and adopting a hairstyle designed to invoke his grandfather's image. Having said that, it is important to distinguish between appearances and reality: While every effort will be made to draw parallels between the young leader and his father and grandfather, his style of leadership and control over the machinery of the state will be very different. It is far more likely that a collective form of leadership with Kim Jong Un as figurehead will emerge as the relationships defining his regency take root and cement themselves in the procedural makeup of governance. Senior members of the Party, armed forces, and the state will contribute to the decision-making process, leaving little room for Kim's own idiosyncratic style, whatever form that takes.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ruediger Frank, "The Party as the Kingmaker: The Death of Kim Jong Il and its Consequences for North Korea," *38 North*, December 21, 2011.

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