

North Korea after Kim Chong-il

Leadership Dynamics and Potential Crisis Scenarios

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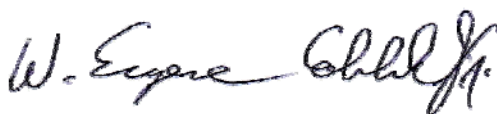
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Executive summary

In August 2008, Kim Chong-il reportedly suffered a stroke. On October 4, after a 51-day absence, he reappeared in the pages of the North Korean media, bringing to an end speculation that he had died. While the international media spotlight began to fade, this incident raised serious questions among intelligence analysts and policymakers alike from Washington, DC to Seoul and Beijing. What would have happened if Kim had died in a period in which the regime had not worked out the succession? What kind of leadership configuration would emerge? Could the regime sustain itself or would it collapse into chaos? Even though the regime has subsequently taken steps to deal with such an eventuality, many of these questions remain.

This paper examines four potential post-Kim Chong-il scenarios:

- Continuation of the Kim regime, albeit in a weaker state
- Collapse of the Kim regime and replacement by another, weak regime
- Collapse of the Kim regime followed by chaos
- Collapse of the Kim regime followed by conflict

Each scenario carries with it implications for North Korean policymaking and the potential for the regime's near-, medium-, and long-term survival. Each also highlights the complexities and dilemmas the United States and its allies in the region would face from a policymaking perspective and in terms of crisis management.

This paper argues that the leadership configuration in place at the time and the circumstances surrounding Kim's death will have a major impact on how regime dynamics evolve in the following weeks, months, and possibly years. Since the Third Party Conference in 2010, Kim Chong-il has placed the succession on a more sure footing. His third son, Kim Chong-un is the heir apparent and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) has been reinvigorated to become the cradle for the transition of power. However, much depends on Kim Chong-il's health. If he dies or becomes incapacitated before this succession plan has time to jell, it is not inconceivable that a more unstable transition could occur. Some alternatives to another hereditary succession include a collective

leadership composed of powerful individuals in the party's Politburo and Central Military Committee or a military strongman.

Regardless of whether there is a straight line hereditary succession or some alternative leadership configuration, there are political, economic, and social forces within the regime that will continue to gnaw away at stability.

- The North Korean political superstructure is a complicated mosaic of shifting and interlocking institutions, resting upon the entrenched foundation of a one-man dictatorship, in which all power is delegated by Kim Chong-il.
- Conflicting lines of authority between party and state provide an ad hoc system of cross-checks and balances. This is a system in which the various components are in competition with each other. Without the lynchpin (Kim Chong-il), what has to date been a scramble for influence among subordinates could evolve into a competition for power.
- North Korea's ability to deal with pressures on the regime will be affected by the make-up of its senior leadership as many of the older, more experienced, leaders die off and are replaced by a younger, less influential (and more opaque), generation of leaders just coming on the scene.
- North Korea's economic decline since the mid-1990s has effectively reduced the dependence of the common people and the ruling elite on the current regime, making their actions during a crisis less predictable.
- While social control mechanisms are still largely in place, they have been relaxed since the late 1990s. In addition to recasting the social contract between the regime and the populace, the economic decline in North Korea has contributed to increased social mobility and increased information flow.

While this paper does not subscribe to the view that a near-term collapse of the North Korean regime is the likeliest (or even a likely) possibility, it does not discount it. Given the right combination of factors, be they political or environmental, the leadership configuration following Kim Chong-il's death might not hold. Infighting within the senior leadership could lead the regime into a downward spiral it is not able to escape from. If that occurs, this paper posits two collapse scenarios. The first is a traditional collapse followed by chaos, which would present the international community with a humanitarian crisis and floods of refugees. The second, nightmare, scenario, envisions regime collapse followed by the emergence of warlords who ensure their hold on power and resources through violence. This scenario would present the international community with a potentially highly volatile and unpredictable situation. Centralized

command and control would be weak at best and maybe even non-existent. Very likely, pockets of control would exist throughout the country, arranged along geographical and, possibly, existing military lines. Probably the most daunting aspect of this scenario is the potential for conflict to break out inside North Korea.

The ability of the international community to deal with these scenarios will be based on the various countries' situational awareness and skill in diplomacy and crisis management. As such, the intention of this study is to present policymakers with an overview of the potentialities that could face them in the aftermath of Kim Chong-il's death. Only through an understanding of what could unfold, can policymakers be in a position to mitigate the consequences.

North Korean Regime Dynamics and Persistent Pressures¹

For nearly two decades, scholars and intelligence analysts have been predicting North Korea's collapse and the impending catastrophe that could follow. The years have come and gone and the Pyongyang regime remains, albeit economically weaker and by some accounts politically shaky. Consequently, this paper will not make any such predictions, but instead will discuss some of the more likely crisis scenarios that *could* unfold in North Korea and, if so, would demand that countries in the region institute emergency response measures to deal with the consequences. For each scenario, the paper will discuss the political, economic, and social indicators that might provide some warning of an imminent crisis. By paying attention to these indicators, analysts and policymakers might become aware of transformative change in North Korea, thus allowing for contingency planning.²

This paper will begin with a discussion of leadership dynamics inside North Korea, which will be a primary driver of how the regime evolves in the future. It is the view of this author that the dynamics are changing in order to accommodate Kim's declining health and the upcoming succession. Next, the paper will examine the economic, social, and political stresses on the regime, and thus will lay the foundation for understanding the viability of the pillars that have ensured the persistence of the regime up to this point. The paper will conclude with a discussion of four possible succession scenarios that could precipitate a crisis on the peninsula: (1) continuation of the Kim regime, albeit in a weaker state; (2) collapse/removal of the Kim regime and replacement by another, weaker, regime; (3) collapse of the Kim regime followed by chaos; and (4) collapse of the

¹ This paper represents research conducted by the author over the last two years. A preliminary draft was written in 2009, but has been updated based on interviews in the Asia region, including meetings at a number of research organizations in Beijing in May 2011.

² For additional analysis of the impact a North Korean crisis might have on the United States and the countries in the region, see Ferial Ara Saeed and James J. Przystup, *Korean Futures: Challenges to U.S. Diplomacy of North Korean Regime Collapse* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, September 2011).

Kim regime followed by conflict. For each scenario, the broad contours of an emergency management strategy will be explored.

Regime dynamics under Kim Chong-il

In order to understand the potential for rapid (and potentially unpredictable) change in North Korea, it is important to appreciate the ruling system that Kim Chong-il has created. Is it flexible? Does it have fissures? Does it retain its legitimacy? Can it maintain its cohesiveness in the face of political, economic, and social pressure, both internal and external? Some answers to these questions can be found by examining the regime's structure and operation, leadership make-up, and ideological foundations.

Kim Chong-il as the focal point

The North Korean political superstructure is a complicated mosaic of shifting and interlocking institutions, resting upon the entrenched foundation of a one-man dictatorship, in which all power is delegated by Kim Chong-il. The institutions of both the party and the state, in terms of both their relationships with one another and the relationships of various organs within them, are essentially creations of Kim Chong-il (and his father). They are designed not to limit the *Suryong's* (Leader's) power, but to limit that of his subordinates and potential rivals and to facilitate the consolidation of his own authority. Conflicting lines of authority between party and state provide an ad hoc system of cross-checks and balances. Although various party and state institutions are invested with certain well-defined formal functions and powers, with identifiable lines of legal responsibility, and with specified procedures, the actual process is different.³

To date, regime dynamics in the Kim Chong-il era have been based largely on informal connections. Kim promotes a system whereby he is the focal point for many separate chains of command.⁴ This, in turn, has led to competing centers of authority and a scramble for influence among subordinates. While institutions and bureaucracies exist and elaborate legal procedures and regulations provide the outlines of formal rule, the

³ For a detailed examination of how the North Korean regime makes decisions, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

⁴ Ken E. Gause, "The North Korean Leadership: System Dynamics and Fault Lines," in Kongdan, Oh Hassig, ed., *North Korean Policy Elites*. Institute for Defense Analysis Paper P-3903 (2004).

formal legal framework is often violated by a body of secret and unpublished circulars, regulations, decrees, orders, and resolutions, which supersede published norms.⁵

As part of Kim Chong-il's hub-and-spoke leadership style, he often circumnavigates direct chains of command in order to give himself alternate reservoirs of information.⁶ This allows him to access information that might be denied through formal channels. It also allows him to keep tabs on the senior leadership. He does this by forming alliances with trusted individuals within key ministries and commands. This keeps other senior leaders off-balance and prevents them from using their bureaucracy as a breeding ground for anti-regime cabals and plots.

Competition within the system

In short, Kim has created a system in which the various components are in competition with each other. In an administrative sense, this is visible in policy development: policies are developed and executed through a mix of formal and informal competition. Critical to the policymaking process is consensus building among the various bureaucracies involved. In the past, this has been a contentious process that has occasionally led to two conflicting policies, both signed by Kim without realizing the inherent contradictions. The process also has fomented fierce bureaucratic turf wars.⁷

Competition may be useful to Kim in the policymaking process, but it is potentially destabilizing in terms of security. Pyongyang is defended by what some call a “triplicate guard structure.” The inner ring of defense is provided by the Guard Command. This corps-level unit, which has between 50,000 and 100,000 troops, is responsible for the protection and well-being of the core leadership, including Kim Chong-il. The next line of defense is the Pyongyang Defense Command (PDC), which is responsible for the protection of Pyongyang and the surrounding areas. It takes its tasking from the General Staff and oversees the movement of all forces within the capital.⁸ Like the Guard Command, the PDC also has close ties to Kim Chong-il. The PDC exists inside the most capable and best equipped of the Korean People's Army (KPA) corps, the Third Corps. These three units—the Guard Command, the PDC, and the Third Corps—will be

⁵ Author's discussion with North Korea watchers at the Institute of National Security Strategy, Seoul (2009, 2010).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Civil-Military Trends: Military-First Politics to a Point* (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2006).

responsible for ensuring security in the capital in the hours and days following the death or incapacitation of the Supreme Leader. Any emerging leader or collection of leaders will first need to secure the loyalty of these forces.

It is unclear whether the elements of the Praetorian Guard, listed in the table below, always act in concert. There is speculation that tension might exist over command and control, due to the fact that the Guard Command (especially Kim Chong-il's personal escort)⁹ and the PDC allegedly report to separate chains of command—the KWP and the MPAF (Minister of the People's Armed Forces), respectively.¹⁰ In addition, under both Kim Il-sung and Kim Chong-il, these and other security organizations have battled each other over turf, assets (including smuggling), and access to the core leadership.¹¹ In the late 1990s, two key components of the regime's surveillance apparatus, the State Security Department (SSD) and the Military Security Command, were involved in a bureaucratic turf war that ended with a major purge of the SSD.¹² According to some sources, the Military Security Command and the Ministry of People's Security have tussled in the past, when the latter has crossed the line into what the former considers its sphere of influence.¹³

These institutions, which are responsible for regime protection, have seen changes in leadership over the past few years. Some commanders have died, and others have retired. From what little is known about the current commanders, they apparently hail from the

⁹ The Guard Command exists within the KWP, not KPA, apparatus. According to defector accounts, a General Guard Bureau was recently carved out of the General Guard Command and dedicated to protection of Kim Chong-il and other members of the North Korean leadership. This bureau is reportedly commanded by LTG Ri Kuk-chun. Ri's relationship to Guard Command director, Col. Yong Chong-nin, is unclear.

¹⁰ "Former DPRK Bodyguard on 'Conflict' Between Bodyguard General Bureau, Defense Ministry," *Pukhan Yojigyo'ng*, 1 June 2006.

¹¹ Author's discussions in the region.

¹² For a detailed discussion of North Korea's internal security apparatus and the competing elements within it, see Ken E. Gause, *Police State: North Korea's System of Control, Surveillance, and Punishment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, forthcoming in 2011). See also, "Kim Chong-il Is a Cruel Human Being Who Acts Unpredictably When He Is Driven to a Crisis," *Kim Chong-irui Yorisa* (September 23, 2003). See also Ri Yo'ng-hwa: "State Security Department, Not Nuclear Weapons or Missiles, Support Kim Jong Il Regime: Mechanism of Violence To Suppress 'People's Revolt' That Dictator Fears," *Sapio*, 24 January 2007.

¹³ Author's discussion with Pyongyang watchers in the region (2007).

second and third generations and all have close ties to Kim Chong-il.¹⁴ The relationships between the commanders themselves, however, remain unclear.

Table 1. Praetorian Guard

Unit	Commander/Director	Predecessor	Comments
Pyongyang Defense Command	N/A	Col. Gen. Ri Yong-ho	N/A. Direct ties to Kim Chong-il.
Guard Command	Col. Gen. Yung Chong-nin	MAR Ri Ul-sol	Rising star in the Guard Command since 2000. Reports directly to Kim Chong-il.
Military Security Command	Col. Gen. Kim Won-hong	Gen. Won Ung-hui	Links to the VII and IX corps. Former vice director of GPB. Reports directly to Kim Chong-il.
III Corps	N/A	VMAR Chang Song-u	Chang Song-u, who died in 2009, was Chang Song-taek's older brother. The current commander is rumored to be a former division commander and deputy chief of GSD. Reports to GSD.
State Security Department	Rumored to be either Kim Chong-il or his heir apparent, Kim Chong-un. First Deputy Director U Tong-chuk oversees day-to-day operations.	Last reported director was Ri Chin-su, who died in 1987	Gen. U Tong-chuk is a member of the Politburo, CMC, and NDC. He reports to Chang Song-taek, the director of the KWP Administrative Department.
Ministry of People's Security	Gen. Ri Myong-su	Chu Sang-song	Links to NDC. Former director of General Staff Ops

¹⁴ The North Korean leadership is composed of four main generations: the partisan (first) generation of Kim Il-sung, the second generation of Kim Chong-il, and the third and fourth generations.

As for the military, Kim Chong-il, like Kim Il-sung before him, has instituted a policy of “divide and rule” to control the KPA. This has ensured that serious opposition within the armed forces has been muted since the 1960s. While there were some alleged coup attempts in the early and mid 1990s, there appear to be no powerful individuals with patronage systems completely separate from the Kim family.¹⁵

While the evidence of existing warlords within the North Korean system is speculative at best, the possibility of their creation is real. Most likely, they would emerge within Kim Chong-il’s inner core of supporters. As Kim Chong-il has isolated his power by narrowing the channels of communication and transferring lines of authority between bureaucracies, he not only has caused deep fractures within the leadership but also has brought the security forces into conflict with each other. The struggle for resources has exacerbated these fractures and led to numerous turf battles. Still, no leader is likely to emerge into a full-blown power center unless there is a serious power vacuum within the leadership.

The ageing senior leadership and rise of new generations of leaders

North Korea’s ability to deal with pressures on the regime will be affected by the make-up of its senior leadership and the younger generation of leaders just coming on the scene. The 30 or so top leaders are now a decade and a half older than they were when Kim Chong-il came to power in 1994. Many in this geriatric leadership are in their late 70s and 80s and have long since given up the day-to-day responsibilities of running the country. On the one hand, many within this group of first- and second-generation leaders are the strongest proponents of the *Chuche* philosophy¹⁶ and the Kim family rule; on the other hand, their ability to manage crises (especially unforeseen ones) is open to question. The views of these “old guard” are generally considered to be hard line and intransigent. They are unlikely to support change in the system, especially if it could threaten the status quo balance of power within the regime.

¹⁵ Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011).

¹⁶ *Chuche* loosely translates as self-reliance and independence. It will be discussed later in this report.

Table 2. Recent Turnover in Senior North Korean Leadership

Name	Position	Age	Comments
Cho Myong-nok	First Vice Chairman of the NDC, Politburo Presidium Member	82	Died of heart attack in November 2010.
Pak Chong-sun	Politburo Alternate Member, 1 st Vice Director of OGD	82	Died of cancer in January 2011.
Kim Il-chol	Former Member of NDC	80	Demoted from Minister to First Vice Minister of People's Armed Forces in 2009 and retired from all posts in May 2010.
Chon Pyong-ho	Politburo Member. Former Member of NDC.	84	Relieved of his NDC post in April 2011.
Chu Sang-song	Politburo Member. Former Minister of Public Security	78	Relieved of his post as Minister of Public Security in March 2011.
Ri Tae-nam	Politburo Alternate Member. Former Vice Premier	71	Relieved of his post as Vice Premier in April 2011.
Ri Che-kang	First Vice Director of OGD	80	"Killed" in car accident in June 2010.
Ryu Kyong	Vice Director of SSD, Head of 2 nd Bureau	N/A	Reportedly executed in 2011 for leaking secret information during inter-Korean talks.

The second and third echelons of power, where much of the day-to-day running of the regime takes place, is increasingly populated with individuals from the third and fourth generations. These two generations are likely to differ greatly from one another in their views of the regime and its policies. Some of these views also may diverge from those of Kim Chong-il's second generation—and even more from those of the first generation of leaders, who were close to Kim Il-sung. The third generation is the main force of the three revolutions that helped lay the groundwork for the monolithic ideological system

(1970s). According to some reporting, individuals in this generation are characterized by a strong sense of identity with the system, as they glorify the greatest period of the socialist system. Individuals in the fourth generation, by contrast, have a weaker sense of identity, as they came of age during a period when North Korea was gradually declining economically and diplomatically.

Persistent pressures on the regime

The above discussion paints a picture of a regime that continues to function and hold onto power and is struggling to come to terms with internal inconsistencies and potential fault lines. It is not a stagnant regime, but one that has shown (and continues to show) a great deal of resiliency. Still, despite efforts to rewire the leadership structure to deal with Kim's declining health and the upcoming succession, the regime faces many pressures that are not easily solved and will be fundamental in the next chapter of North Korean history. Economic, social, ideological, and political pressures are the most important stressors to understand when discussing the possibility of a crisis erupting in North Korea in the near future.

Economic pressures

Since the 1990s, there have been a number of studies on the North Korean economy, some of which have contended that the regime was on the brink of collapse. While the North Korean economy had been in long-term decline since the early 1970s, the collapse of the Soviet Union set in motion a chain of events that resulted in a severe downturn. Soviet and East European trade assistance and concessions disappeared. China, no longer competing with the Soviet Union for influence in North Korea, also curtailed assistance. This resulted in collapse of the state-run economy, made worse by mismanagement of the flooding and resultant famine that hit the country in the mid 1990s. In 1999, North Korea released figures showing a 37 percent increase in deaths between 1995 and 1998; the news media said this meant that the famine had killed about 220,000 North Koreans, or 1 percent of the population, during that time. Independent sources give wide-ranging estimates of the numbers of deaths—anywhere from 600,000 to 3 million (the latter figure given by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)).¹⁷

Although the agro-economy has recovered somewhat in the last few years, North Korea remains dependent on food aid from international donors—principally South Korea,

¹⁷ “North Korea famine at a glance,” <http://www.alertnet.org>, assessed on July 18, 2006.

China, the United States, and such international organizations as the UN World Food Program—to fill a food shortfall of between 20 and 30 percent.¹⁸ While it is impossible to tell whether the North Korean regime would have collapsed in the 1990s in the absence of foreign aid, it is clear that by the late 1990s the prospect of “economic collapse” had diminished materially due to an upsurge in provisions of goods from abroad. That said, food insecurity remains one of the regime’s key weak points because shortages undermine the ideology of *Chuche* (basically “self-reliance”) through continued reliance on foreign donors, and demonstrates the weakness of the regime’s food distribution system.

Like the agricultural sector, the industrial sector of the economy has fallen on hard times. Kim Il-sung originally based the North Korean economic development on heavy industry. Its initial success, however, became a liability as the national economy grew more complex. Industrial decay was caused by systemic inefficiencies in the central planning mechanism. These inefficiencies became terminal in the 1970s, creating bottlenecks in resources and manpower throughout the economy.¹⁹ Also, as in the agricultural sector, energy scarcity and misallocation of funding had a dramatic impact, forcing the closure of factories and undermining the transportation infrastructure.

The economic decline affected the regime in two ways. First, it reduced the capacity of the regime to maintain the loyalty of the ruling elite. Several commentators have noted the almost-feudal-like system of payments and gifts that are distributed among key socio-political groups in order to maintain their loyalty to Kim Chong-il and the ruling circle.²⁰ As the economy has declined, maintaining these payments has become more difficult.

Second, economic decline reduced the reliance of the wider population on the state. In 1997-98 when the ration distribution system collapsed, the population was forced to fend for itself. As a result, black markets and sanctioned market activity flourished and the state became unable to enforce regulations as corruption became a primary source of alternative income for officials. The expansion of unofficial food markets, therefore, has diminished the regime’s ability to use the public distribution system as a tool to ensure the people’s loyalty and dependence.

¹⁸ “Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation—Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” World Food Program, 2006.

¹⁹ B. Seliger, “The North Korean Economy: Nuclear Crisis and Decline, or Peace and Reform in the Last Asian Dynastic Regime?” *Korea’s Economy* (2004).

²⁰ Chung Min Lee, “Nuclear Sisyphus: The myth of denuclearizing North Korea,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (March 2007): 15–22.

Both of these changes effectively reduced the dependence of the common people and the ruling elite on the current regime.²¹ The economic decline forced all members of society to become more independent.

Pyongyang took a variety of measures to try to deal with the collapse of the economy.²² In 2002, it introduced the so-called “July 1 measures,” which led to what many called a partial liberalization of the economy. Retail prices were increased, in order to get rid of enforced artificial pricing and bring commerce (on such commodities as rice) into line with market prices. Local state enterprises were allowed to sell their raw materials on the market and create incentives for workers. In many respects, the reforms were designed to give state sanction to the partial market economy that had arisen in the 1990s and relax regime controls, which had become nothing more than rhetoric.

This liberalization, if that is what it was, did not last long. As the impact of the collapse and the famine of the 1990s began to wane and the influx of international aid into North Korea increased (primarily from China and South Korea), the regime felt comfortable in rolling back the concessions it had made on the economic front. In 2005, the government banned the private trade of grain and revived the rationing system.²³ It also placed severe regulations and oversight on the markets. In 2007, the KWP Central Committee issued a document on the “problem of the markets,” calling them “breeding grounds for speculators.”²⁴

In 2009, the crackdown on the markets continued with the November currency revaluation. The currency reform had multiple objectives: controlling price inflation; reasserting state control of the economy; weeding out corruption; eliminating or reducing market activities; and redirecting human resources to the formal state sector. But, most of all, it was a political measure designed to recentralize control of the

²¹ North Korea lacks any developed civil society or formal—non-state controlled—religious institutions where people could develop the leadership and organizational skills needed for an opposition movement; even so, some seeds of civil society may have been sown by the diminishing state capacity to provide for the population.

²² For a detailed examination of how Pyongyang has handled the economic crisis, see Lankov, “North Korea: Attempt at Counter-reforms.”

²³ By May 2008, South Korea’s National Intelligence Service estimated that about 60 percent of the North Korean population was receiving full rations (540 grams per day per adult) or almost full rations. The less-privileged segments of the population were receiving between 300 and 400 grams and still needed to resort to the open market to make up the difference. See “They Receive Only Half the Minimum Food Necessary,” *Kyonghyang Sinmun*, 24 May 2008.

²⁴ *Rimjingang*, no. 2 (2008).

economy, a prerequisite as North Korea moved closer to succession. The revaluation was a failure that not only further crippled the economy, but led to widespread purges. Pak Nam-gi, the director of the KWP's Finance Department, was allegedly executed.

South Korea's central bank in a report released in June 2010 estimated that North Korea's economy contracted 0.9 percent, the third time in the past four years the impoverished economy has shrunk. It grew 3.1 percent in 2008. The size of the North's economy was estimated at 28.6 trillion South Korean won (\$24.2 billion), or just 2.7 percent that of the South's. Despite its troubles, the North has set an objective of achieving the status of a "powerful and prosperous nation" in 2012, the 100th anniversary of the birth of the country's founder, Kim Il-sung.

It is hard to imagine how the negative aspects of the reform drive can be reversed without a major, not incremental, shift in strategy. Amid popular resentment and growing distrust, a number of questions arise about how the government will try to reconcile its policy with more economically rational approaches. Even if the state is able to regain control over the economy, it is highly questionable whether the population will give up the independence it garnered as a result of the suffering in the late 1990s. Protests have already taken place as a consequence of the regime's efforts to roll back the markets.

Although not currently a problem, the plight of the economy could eventually impact the regime's control at the center.²⁵ Chronic economic distress has not led to a complete economic implosion, because of the robustness of parallel (illicit) economies and their ability to perform services and generate hard currency. Without the services and revenue provided by these parallel economies, the resource pool available to North Korea's elite from the traditional state-based economy would diminish significantly, damaging the patronage networks that have cemented Kim Chong-il's leadership. Some sources argue that elite unity decreases when economic rewards replace party loyalty as a motivator for political support. Should income from illicit resources decrease—for example, through foreign policing measures, such as the U.S. Illicit Activities Initiative—Kim's (or his successors') ability to finance this patronage system might be compromised, leading to wavering support among top officials in key state institutions.²⁶

²⁵ An argument can be made that the sinking of the *Cheonan* can be traced back to the currency revaluation. According to this line of thinking, Kim Chong-il gave the order to attack the South Korean ship in an attempt to recapture the support for the succession, which had been lost because of the backlash caused by the economic debacle.

²⁶ In recent years, China's North Korean watching community has shifted its view of threats to North Korea's near-term survival. In the past, the concern centered on a botched succession following Kim Chong-il's demise. In the aftermath of North Korea's Third Party Conference in

Social pressures

Social pressures have some similarities to economic pressures: in both cases, the North Korean regime has identified the population itself as a potential source of instability; and in both cases, the regime's control mechanisms were weakened in the 1990s and it has tried to resurrect them in recent years.

The 60-plus years since the founding of the DPRK have witnessed the construction of a system of control that is unique even when compared to the communist systems in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The population of North Korea is rigidly controlled. Individual rights are subordinate to the rights of the state and party. The regime uses education, mass mobilization, persuasion, and coercion to guarantee political and social conformity. Massive propaganda and political indoctrination are reinforced by extensive police and public security forces.

Traditionally, there have been five categories of social control: residence, travel, employment, clothing and food, and family life. Change of residence is possible only with party approval. Those who move without a permit are not eligible for food rations or housing allotments and are subject to criminal prosecution. Travel is controlled by the Ministry of People's Security, and a travel pass is necessary. Travel on other than official business is limited strictly to attending family functions, and obtaining approval is normally a long and complicated process. The ration system does not recognize individuals while they are traveling, which further curtails movement. Employment is governed by the party, with assignments made on the basis of political reliability and family background. A change in employment is made at the party's convenience.

While these control mechanisms are still largely in place, they have been relaxed since the late 1990s.²⁷ In addition to recasting the social contract between the regime and the populace, the economic decline in North Korea has laid the foundation for social

2010 and the reinvigoration of a more formal leadership structure, the concern now centers on Pyongyang's failure to embrace economic reform. According to some Chinese North Korea watchers, if Pyongyang does not begin to embrace reform (hopefully centered on the Chinese model), the regime will begin to experience economic collapse in the five to seven year time frame. Author's interviews in Beijing in 2009 and 2011.

²⁷ Since 2009, the regime has been trying to reinvigorate these controls. This is manifested through the growing profile of the internal security forces, especially the Ministry of People's Security and the State Security Department. At the same time, the regime, in the aftermath of the currency revaluation debacle, has had to back off on its attempts to close the markets and prohibit the use of foreign currency. See Ken E. Gause, *Police State: North Korea's System of Control, Surveillance, and Punishment*, op. cit.

instability in the future and weakened the regime's ability to keep the population under control. Two phenomena which have contributed to this situation are increased social mobility and increased information flow.

The tighter economic conditions, highlighted by the breakdown in the rationing system, forced the state to tolerate unrestricted internal travel in order to allow people to find food. This undermined the system of travel restrictions designed to keep people isolated and under surveillance. In addition, this freedom of movement within society allowed for an easier exodus of labor from the state sector into market activities. As a result, some people were able to escape not only from the workplace but also from ideological indoctrination, which was routinely reinforced throughout the workday.

Markets and increased mobility have complicated North Korea's ability to control information within the regime. Markets are fed by a burgeoning cross-border trade with China. This trade not only reveals the inferiority of North Korean products, but also provides a wide variety of cultural products that undermine the regime's ideology and the government's ability to control information. These include small televisions that can receive Chinese broadcasts in border areas; radios recalibrated to pick up Voice of America and Radio Free Asia; South Korean music videos and DVDs; and mobile phones.²⁸

The North Korean authorities acted much as they had in regaining control of the economy: in 2004, they introduced a set of policies to rein in what they considered excesses in terms of population movement and access to information. In May 2004, it instituted a ban on the use of cell phones by private individuals.²⁹ While bans against the selling and viewing of contraband movies (especially from South Korea) never ceased, a campaign began in 2005 to devote more attention to this issue.³⁰ One result was enhanced baggage inspections on trains and buses. They also strengthened controls on the border

²⁸ As of 2005, approximately 20,000 North Koreans living along the Chinese frontier had access to mobile phones. See "A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger," *Human Rights Watch* 18, no. 3 (2006). More than half of all North Koreans have allegedly watched banned South Korean movies and television programs that have been smuggled into the country on video and DVD. See "Perilous Journeys: The Plight of North Koreans in China and Beyond," International Crisis Group (2006).

²⁹ "Ban on Cell Phones in the North Confirmed," *Hanguk Ilbo*, 4 June 2004. The ban came in the wake of the Yongchon explosion, leading many to speculate that it was tied to this incident; however, subsequent evidence suggests it is part of a larger hard-line policy.

³⁰ "North Koreans Continue to Talk about 'Deliverance from Capitalism,'" *Daily NK*, as cited in Lankov, "North Korea: Attempt at Counter-reforms."

with China, which has led to a dramatic reduction in the number of North Koreans crossing the border.³¹ Recently, “groups for combating anti-socialist phenomena” have increased their periodic checks on police and security service personnel in the border zones, in an effort to combat corruption.³² Several local officials who were convicted of corruption have been executed.

It is unclear whether the regime’s efforts to reassert control over the economy and society will be successful. While these measures may pay some dividends in the short term, it is hard to believe that the colossal changes the country has undergone since the 1990s will be entirely reversed. If not, the two phenomena that this time of troubles unleashed (social mobility and proliferation of information from the outside) together have the potential to break down barriers within the regime and expose the growing gulf between official propaganda and reality.³³ While in itself this revelation might not threaten the regime, in combination with other pressures, such as growing economic hardship, it could fuel dissent and activism.

An increasingly strained ideology

In the face of these economic and social phenomena, the regime’s ideology has become increasingly strained. North Korea is a country that defies conventional characterization. Communism and traditional Confucianism have fused together to produce two unique pillars of thinking inside the regime: the Kim Il-sung cult of personality (Kimilsungism); and *Chuche*, the official ideology. Kimilsungism is an attempt by the North Korean regime to find a “creative application of Marxism-Leninism to the unique conditions of Korea.”³⁴

³¹ “Ten Years of Defections from the North: The Number is Falling, the Quantity of Representatives from Different Social Groups is Increasing,” *Daily NK*, 14 May 2007.

³² *North Korea Today*, 29 October 2008.

³³ Access to information also limits the regime’s ability to control the fallout from a famine, as it did in the 1990s. Even if the elite were provided for, they would probably be aware of the suffering of their relatives in the provinces, something that could turn them against the regime.

³⁴ According to Hwang Chang-yop, former secretary of North Korea’s Workers Party, the turning point for North Korea’s personality cult and dictatorship of the highest leader came in the late 1960s. Kim Il-sung used the conflict between China and the Soviet Union to exert North Korea’s independence from both camps. He went on to purge all opposition members from the Workers’ Party, and by 1958, he was able to establish dictatorship of the highest leader based on a party filled with only his people. This was also the period in which Kim Chong-il graduated from university and entered the Korean Workers’ Party, where he began to compete against his uncle, Kim Young Chu. Their rivalry was based on who could put Kim Il-sung on a higher pedestal. Thanks to this competition, the Kim Il-sung personality cult went beyond the Soviet-

Based largely on Kim Il-sung's exploits as an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader during the Japanese occupation,³⁵ this doctrine signified the consolidation of the Great Leader's power and legitimized the role of the apparatus (primarily within the Korean Workers' Party) dedicated to enforcing his will. It is broader than the ideological core of communism, for it plays on the central Confucian ideas of political centralization and obedience to authority, in order to superimpose family and kinship loyalties on loyalty to the leader and the state.³⁶ Kim Chong-il's legitimate claim to power is derived from the genealogical link to his father through Confucian notions of filial piety and ancestor worship of Kim Il-sung as the "father" of the North Korean state.

Intermingled with Kimilsungism is the official ideology of the North Korean state, *Chuche*, which is a philosophy of self-reliance and insularity, of survivalism and powerful post-colonial ethnocentrism.³⁷ Its precise definition is elusive, perhaps because over time it has been subtly reinterpreted to legitimize changing regime policies. *Chuche* literally means "main body" or "subject"; it has also been translated in North Korean sources as "independent stand" and the "spirit of self-reliance." The core goal of *Chuche* is the maintenance of a thriving, self-reliant national economy operating in a secure environment, guarded by indigenous defense forces.³⁸ According to Kim Chong-il's *On the Chuche Idea*, the application of *Chuche* in state policy entails the following:

- The people must have independence (chajusong) in thought and politics, economic self-sufficiency, and self-reliance in defense.
- Policy must reflect the will and aspirations of the masses and employ them fully in revolution and construction.

style dictatorship to become a new concept called "absolutism of the Great Leader." Author's interview of Hwang Chang-yop, April 2009.

³⁵ See "Unique Theory of People's Guerrilla War in the History of War," Korean Central News Agency (December 16, 2006).

³⁶ The "politics of loyalty and filial piety" not only is relevant to Kim Il-sung but also has become an essential part of Kim Chong-il's regime. According to some scholars, North Korea was able to weather the crises of the 1990s partly because of this doctrine. Despite severe famine, breakdown of the social control system, mass defection, and other signs of systemic crisis, there was no apparent collective resistance by the people. See Seong-Chang Cheong, "Stalinism and Kimilsungism: A Comparative Analysis of Ideology and Power," *Asian Perspective* 24, no. 1 (2000).

³⁷ B. Cummings, "The Corporate State in North Korea," in H. Koo, ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

³⁸ H. Park, *North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

- Methods of revolution and construction must be suitable to the situation of the country.
- The most important work of revolution and construction is molding people ideologically as communists and mobilizing them to constructive action.

The *Chuche* outlook also requires absolute loyalty to the party and leader. In practice, therefore, *Chuche* has legitimized the continued operation of North Korea's centrally planned economy, isolated from the global marketplace, around which a garrison state has developed.

Like many ideology-driven regimes, it is incumbent on the North Korean leadership to reconcile any new policy initiative with the central tenets of the existing ideology. Kim Chong-il has some latitude to stretch ideology to fit diverse situations, but he must be careful not to get ahead of the apparatus, which sees "*Chuche* thought" as a key pillar of its existence—the pillar that rationalizes its relationship to the Great Leader.

As the North Korean regime moves into the 21st century, these ideological pillars appear to be fading. While Kim Il-sung is still much loved, the veneration surrounding him has not easily transferred to Kim Chong-il. Kim Chong-il's legitimacy is derived directly from his status as the son of Kim Il-sung, and from his being the greatest disciple of his father—not, as hard as he might try, from being a revered philosopher in his own right. As a consequence, the regime has begun to downplay the Kimist personality cult in favor of other methods of legitimizing the regime. Since the early 1990s, the regime has begun to place an emphasis on historical and spiritual values. This is reflected in the use of Confucian norms in public policy and everyday life, and legitimizing the state through reference to ancient Korean kingdoms. It has also begun to promote military-first politics, which has been successful as an economic pillar and ideological rallying point since the famine period of the late 1990s. This could suggest that while the veneration of Kim Il-sung may remain potent, the relevance of the personality cult to everyday survival and regime perpetuation has diminished. Kim Chong-il's ability to pass this veneration on to his successor is highly questionable.

As for *Chuche*, the image it portrays of a self-reliant country is increasingly at odds with reality. North Korea is far from having the independence and self-sufficiency to which it aspires. It has suffered famine and is plagued by a chronic energy crisis. Far from relying on its own energy sources and agricultural production, it has been reduced to receiving food aid from South Korea, the United States, and other countries that it had previously disdained as "imperialist aggressors." This reliance on aid, not to mention the presence of international aid organizations inside North Korea, is a direct challenge to *Chuche*, because it destroys the myth of self-reliance.

And because the institutions that uphold the regime find legitimacy and purpose in the ideas that make up *Chuche*, if the ideology falters as a guide and legitimating paradigm, the institutional pillars of the regime will lose their reason for existing.³⁹

Laying the Foundation for Another Hereditary Succession

As mentioned above, this regime appears to be laying the groundwork for the upcoming succession. More than any other challenge faced by the North Korean regime, its greatest vulnerability—and the one thing that could lead to drastic changes and unintended consequences—is the death of Kim Chong-il.

Over the past few years, journals and the foreign press have published a spate of articles on possible succession in North Korea. Press coverage surrounding the October 2007 summit between Kim Chong-il and No Mu-hyon focused not so much on what could be achieved as on the state of health of the North Korean leader. For years, rumors have ranged from Kim being wheelchair bound due to diabetes, to Kim having received possible heart bypass surgery. Even wilder speculation has contended that Kim died in 2003 and has been replaced by a look-alike. Regardless of whether any of these stories are true, they point to a situation of growing uncertainty at the center of power in this unusually cloistered regime, a prospect that is fraught with danger.

In such countries as North Korea—where personalized leadership has grown around a single figure, augmented by a personality cult that blurs the distinction between the regime and the state—the prospect of an upcoming (or impending) succession can create pressure within a leadership and divert its focus from other pressing problems. As the leader begins to show signs of health problems or weakness, factional infighting and jockeying for power can begin among possible contenders to the throne and their

³⁹ The increasing strain on North Korea's ideology may partly explain its recent belligerence toward the outside world. In the political realm, *Chuche* calls for *chaju* (independence), in which North Korean leaders govern without constraint from outside pressure or internal challenge. Economically, *Chuche* calls for *charip* (self-sustenance), which requires a largely self-contained economy based on domestic workers using domestic resources to satisfy domestic needs. In international relations, *Chuche* advocates *chawi* (self-defense), a foreign policy based on complete equality and mutual respect between nations as well as the right of self-determination and independent policymaking. Because Kim cannot deny the economic and political instability that suggests his government is not acting in accordance with *Chuche* principles, he may be redoubling his efforts to demonstrate his strength and independence in the third *Chuche* realm, foreign/defense policy.

respective patronage systems. As this infighting grows, the regime can become paralyzed and less able to function.

In the months after Kim Chong-il's stroke in August 2008, the regime began to grapple with the implications these challenges had for a leadership model that is informal in its structure and tied intimately to one man. How would it be possible to pass this model to a new leader who lacked the connections and power that Kim possessed? When Kim's choice of his third son, Kim Chong-un, as his successor became known within leadership circles in 2009, these issues became magnified. Not only was Kim Chong-un in his late 20s, but he had only been involved in regime affairs for a couple of years.

More potentially destabilizing was that the regime now had created a second center of power. Members of the North Korean leadership now had to navigate the thorny issue of showing proper deference and support to the heir apparent while maintaining allegiance to the primary leader, Kim Chong-il. This could breed competition among the elites between those trying to maintain or improve their positions during the transition, while at the same time, creating frustration among officials who believe their status and influence are being diminished.⁴⁰

Kim Chong-il was able to mitigate the impact of Kim Il-sung's passing because he had been groomed for leadership for three decades before assuming power. He was able to develop an extensive patronage system with ties throughout the regime. This allowed him to create a state within a state that answered directly to him, not his father. Unless Kim Chong-il's prophecy that he will live to age 90 comes true, North Korea could face an uncertain, and potentially contentious, succession in the coming years. Predicting the outcome of this succession is not easy, given the various factors that might be in play at the time of Kim's demise or removal from the political scene. One thing that seems clear is that the 1994 succession following Kim Il-sung's death holds few insights into the next succession. Only if Kim Chong-il were to live another 10 to 20 years would a true dynastic transfer of power become a strong possibility.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For nearly two years, there have been reports in the regional media that purges have been occurring inside North Korea. While not necessarily indicative of broad opposition to the succession, it does indicate that measures are being taken to lay the foundation for the transition.

⁴¹ This paper does not discount a smooth transition following the death of Kim Chong-il. According to some sources, the regime already has a contingency plan in place in case of such an event. The particulars of such a plan, however, have not emerged, even through rumor channels.

The 2010 resurrection of the party and preparations for the post-Kim leadership configuration

In September 2010, the regime convened the Third Party Conference to mitigate the problems surrounding the eventual transfer of power to a new generation.⁴² A new crop of leaders, many from the provinces, were brought to Pyongyang to sit on the leading party bodies, including the Politburo, Secretariat, and Central Military Committee. In many respects, the Third Party Conference formalized a shift in leadership dynamics that had been taking place in the shadows for nearly two years. Elite politics was no longer centered on just one person. Another formal center of power, while in its infancy, was born. In more practical terms, the conference was noteworthy for a variety of reasons.

First, it established the formal ranking of power as the regime moved into the second phase of the succession. North Korean reporting over the course of several events following the conference suggested that Kim Chong-un was ranked fifth within the leadership,⁴³ behind only his father, Supreme People's Assembly Presidium President Kim Yong-nam, Cabinet Premier Choe Yong-rim, and Chief of the General Staff Ri Yong-ho.⁴⁴ In subsequent months, Kim Chong-un continued to rise through the ranks. At the time of this writing, he appears to be ranked third in the formal power structure behind Kim Chong-il and Kim Yong-nam.

Second, it reoriented the leadership structure in preparation for the upcoming succession by distributing power from Kim Chong-il's one-man control structure to a collective guidance system based on core groups and loyalists with alternate ties to the

⁴² The Chosun Central News Agency (KCNA) announced on 26 June 2010 that "the Politburo of the Central Committee would summon a delegates conference at the beginning of September to elect the leading apparatus of the Workers' Party." The announcement went on to say that the conference was necessary to "reflect the demands for the revolutionary development of the party, which is facing critical changes in bringing about the strong and prosperous state and *chuche* achievements."

⁴³ Notably, Kim Chong-il also debuted in the fifth spot in the power rankings after the Sixth Party Congress in 1980.

⁴⁴ Since his public debut, Kim Chong-un in public appearances typically is listed immediately after the top layer of the Political Bureau and before its main membership. In the photograph taken after the Party Conference showed Kim Chong-un sitting two spots to the left of Kim Chong-il. Since North Korean ranking emanates side to side from the senior most official beginning from the right, this would place Kim Chong-un in the fifth spot. The photograph also revealed other important succession-related clues. Kim Ok (Kim Chong-il's mistress) and Kim Yo-chun (Kim Chong-un's younger sister) stood just behind Pak Chong-sun, the first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department, indicating their informal roles within the power hierarchy.

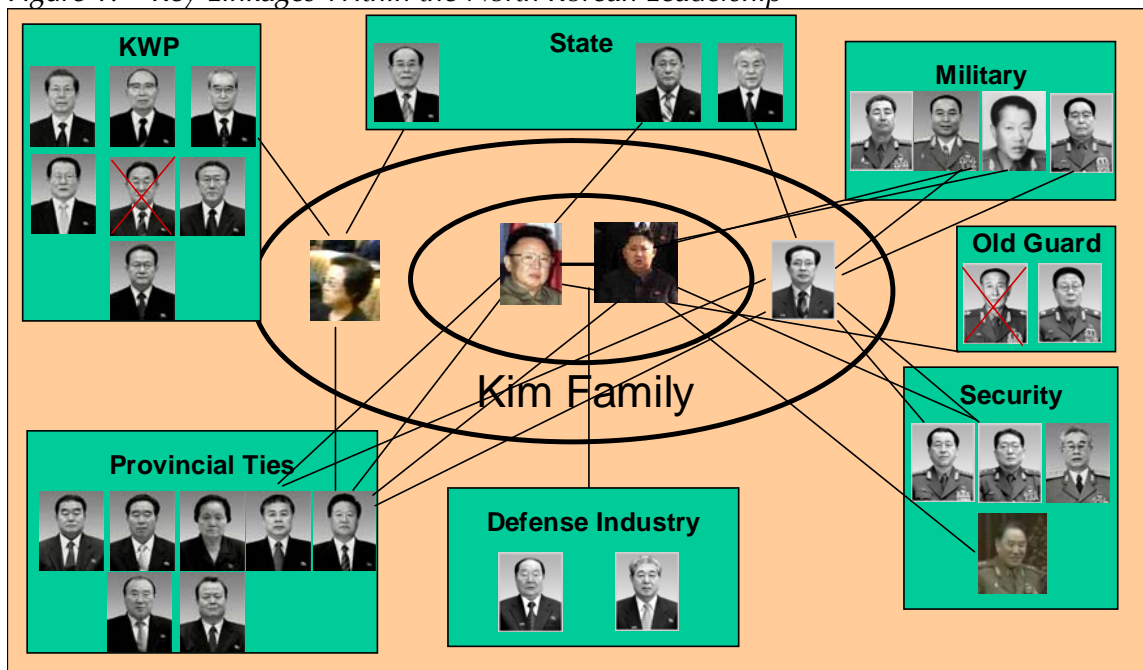
Kim family. In fact, the lead up to the conference and the conference itself suggested rings of power around the heir apparent.

- **The first ring was the Kim family.** The first two names listed among the military promotions (the day before the conference) were Kim Kyong-hui (Kim Chong-il's sister) and Kim Chong-un (Kim Chong-il's son). The third name, Choe Ryong-hae, was the son of a former defense minister and a long-time aide to the Kim family with close ties to both Kim Chong-il and Chang Song-taek.⁴⁵
- **The second ring was the military.** The fact that the military promotions preceded by one day the appointments of the Party Conference seemed to indicate the continued prominence of the Military-first policy and the importance of the KPA to the stability and continuation of the regime.
- **The third ring was the Party.** The Party Conference itself was an indication of the importance of the party's role. It was critical for the succession and the party's revitalization was necessary for the regime's survival beyond Kim Chong-il's death.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Choe's family ties to the Kim family explain his political rise. He is the second son of Choe Hyon, one of Kim Il-sung's closest comrades. He is also known to have maintained a close friendship with Kim Chong-il since childhood and to have a good relationship with Chang Song-taek. Benefiting from his father's political patronage, Choe has served in several key posts. In 1996, he was named the first secretary for the Kim Il-sung Socialist Youth League, the second largest organization in the North after the Workers' Party. He was demoted in 1998 for involvement in a corruption scandal. In 2003, he made a political comeback as a vice director of the KWP General Department. In 2007, he was named secretary in charge of North Hwanghae Province. His political strength was reflected when he came to the inter-Korean border to greet then-South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun for the 2007 summit. He also accompanied Kim Chong-il on trips to China and other public activities.

⁴⁶ Another interpretation of these moves is that Kim Chong-il attempted to structurally guarantee Kim Chong-un's political position by creating a framework of competition over loyalty and mutual check and balance between the military and the party. See Pak Hyong-chung, "Kim Chong-il's China Visit and the Crisis of the '2005-Style' Survival Strategy," op. cit. Pak argues that this strategy is so fraught with problems that it will most likely not work as planned.

Figure 1. Key Linkages Within the North Korean Leadership⁴⁷



In terms of the succession, Kim Chong-il's strategy apparently was to surround his son with patronage networks along three axes so as not to make him vulnerable to any one regent or a collective leadership. Given enough time and skill at power politics, Kim Chong-un could build his own patronage system and ensure his own survival. Instead of the hub and spoke architecture of the Kim Chong-il era, where he was the sole lynch pin, key lines of control now run through several members of the Kim family, including Kim

⁴⁷ This chart is based on appointments to the Third Party Conference. It shows notional links between various North Korean leaders to members of the Kim family (Kim Chong-il, Kim Chong-un, Kim Kyong-hui, and Chang Song-taek). KWP (Top row from L to R: Choe Tae-pok, Kim Kuk-tae, Kim Ki-nam; Middle Row: Hong Sok-hyong, Pak Chong-sun (now deceased), Kim Yong-kon; Bottom Row: Kim Yong-il); State (From L to R: Kim Yong-nam, Kang Sok-chu, Choe Yong-nim); Provincial Ties (Top Row from L to R: Thae Chong-su, Kim Pyong-hae, Kim Rak-hui, Mun Kyong-dok, Choe Ryong-hae; Bottom Row from L to R: Ri Tae-nam and Pak To-chun); Defense Industry (From L to R: Chon Pyong-ho and Chu Kyu-chang); Security (Top Row from L to R: Chu Sang-song, U tong-chuk, and Kim Chang-sop; Bottom Row: Kim Yong-chol); Old Guard (Cho Myong-nok (deseased) and Ri Yong-mu); Military (From L to R: Kim Chong-gak, Ri Yong-ho, Choe Pu-il, and Kim Yong-chun); Kim Family (From L to R: Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Chong-il, Kim Chong-un, and Chang Song-taek). The author is currently working on a forthcoming paper explaining these linkages in more detail.

Kyong-hui, Chang Song-taek, and even the heir apparent, Kim Chong-un, who reportedly now is part of the reporting chain for documents seeking his father's signature.

Third, it transferred the focus of military-first (*songun*) politics from the National Defense Commission to the party. Ten members of the NDC are now members of the Politburo and four occupy positions on the party's Central Military Committee. By making Kim Chong-un a vice chairman of the CMC and pulling from the NDC those members with close ties to the heir apparent and giving them additional posts within the party, the Third Party Congress signaled the return of the party as the seat of military decision-making.

North Korean crisis scenarios

The pressures described in the previous chapter are symptoms of a system in decline. Whether they foreshadow a dramatic collapse or some kind of softer landing is currently unclear. After all, for more than a decade, conventional wisdom has held that the end of North Korea is imminent. While many Pyongyang watchers agree that the regime is facing daunting challenges for the future, there is disagreement about whether it has reached an end or is entering yet another period of transition short of demise.

In all likelihood, North Korea will pursue a “muddling through” strategy when it comes to the regime’s survival.⁴⁸ Such a strategy could yield critical infusions of external assistance without requiring major internal changes. But this cannot be considered a long-term (or even a medium-term) solution. In the absence of significant economic (and possibly political) reform, the regime, at some point, will falter.

This section will examine some of the potential scenarios of a North Korean future. In order to posit possible strategies for crisis management, only those scenarios which could create a *significant crisis* on the peninsula will be considered. Therefore, some popular scenarios, such as suspended animation (Albania model) and soft landing (China model), will not be considered since these scenarios would play out over time and not

⁴⁸ According to a recent report by Russia's state-run Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), the North Korean regime is likely to survive until the late 2020s when it will ultimately collapse due to internal leadership struggles. Russia has shunned using the term “collapse” for the North, so it is unusual for the think tank, which helps devise Moscow's foreign policy, to consider the collapse of the North as a *fait accompli*. See *Korea: Transformation and Reunification Scenarios* (Moscow: IMEMO, 2011).

Sources interviewed by the author in China believe that North Korean troubles will begin because of a lack of economic reform, which will begin to manifest themselves in the five to seven year time frame. However, these North Korea watchers were not willing to forecast the regime’s collapse, a reflection of China’s apparent policy to continue to prop up North Korea, at least for the foreseeable future.

necessarily require emergency management measures.⁴⁹ The chart below provides a brief overview of the more popular succession scenarios.

Table 3. Succession scenarios

Method of power transfer	Leadership configuration	Likelihood	Level of stability
Hereditary following KCI's death	Supreme Leader	Medium. KCU is still building his individual sources of power.	Low. Any successor will be weaker than KCI. In addition, there are sources within the regime that may oppose a third-generation hereditary succession.
Hereditary following KCI's death	Successor supported by collective leadership	High. Successor provides legitimacy to new leadership.	Medium. This configuration has legitimacy and contains powerful figures within the regime. Long-term survival, however, questionable.
Non-hereditary following KCI's death	Collective leadership	Medium. This presupposes that KCI is not able to secure succession process before his death.	Medium. If KCI passes the mantle of leadership to a collective, a smooth transfer of power could take place. If not, this leadership configuration would have to be constructed after KCI's death and, therefore, could be vulnerable to factionalism.
Non-hereditary following KCI's death	Strongman	Low/Medium. This presupposes that an individual can take advantage of the regime in confusion following KCI's death or emerge as part of an ensuing power struggle.	Low/Medium. If this was done in the days after KCI's death, the possibility of retaliation by the larger NK leadership would be high. If, however, a new leader emerged out of a power struggle, his chance of survival would be greater.
Coup d'état	Collective leadership	Low. KCI has taken measures to prevent	Medium. If a collective leadership is able to form

⁴⁹ Also not considered are scenarios driven by actions from North Korea's neighbors, such as the instability that could be caused by Chinese and South Korean decisions to cut off aid.

		factions. But they can emerge if his decline in health is drawn out.	despite KCI measures, it suggests a high level of cohesiveness. Leadership would, however, face legitimacy issues over time.
Coup d'état	Strongman	Low/Medium. Difficult for one person to carry out a coup and make it stick. Could occur, however, if succession process fails and a crisis breaks out within the senior leadership.	Low. A coup would likely take place in an attempt to restore stability. But in the absence of a pervasive patronage system, any coup-inspired leader would fall prey to other forces inside the regime.

Based on this list, this paper will examine four crisis scenarios:

1. Continuation of the Kim regime, albeit in a weaker state
2. Collapse of the Kim regime and replacement by another, weak regime
3. Collapse of the Kim regime followed by chaos
4. Collapse of the Kim regime followed by conflict.

Each of these crisis scenarios brings with it unique dynamics, leadership configurations, and reasons for instability. Each is also potentially characterized by a series of indicators, which could provide the outside world with some understanding about which scenario is in play. Finally, each scenario suggests the broad contours of a management strategy.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Beijing's response to U.S. and South Korean demands for a tougher stance on North Korea in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island highlights the difficulties in regionally-developed contingency planning. China has a near-term interest in not destabilizing North Korea, something Chinese leaders fear would happen if China either adopted a hard line toward North Korea or appeared to be planning for the regime's demise. According to some Chinese policy experts, this position was solidified (within the CCP Politburo Standing Committee) in the aftermath of Kim Chong-il's stroke in 2008. Author's interviews in Beijing in May 2011.

Scenario 1: Continuation of the Kim regime, albeit in a weaker state

North Korea has no formal succession rules in its constitution, laws, or the KWP charter. The decision about the successor and follow-on leadership configuration is Kim's decision. If he follows the pattern of his own succession, the current succession will take place in three phases.

- First, a preparatory or apprentice phase for the successor
- Second, a limited duopoly phase that begins with the announcement of the successor-designate and limited power sharing with Kim Chong-il retaining the preponderance of power
- Third, a transition phase in which the son's power begins to eclipse that of the father.

Currently, the regime is in phase two, which began with the announcement of Kim Chong-un to the world at the Third Party Conference. As this phase progresses, Kim will allow a two-man leadership to emerge with his son taking a subordinate position. In the third phase, Kim will allow his successor to gradually eclipse his own power as he steps into the background.

Characteristics and indicators of scenario 1

While the regime might support a third-generation hereditary succession for the sake of legitimacy, few feel that Kim Chong-un will have the power of his father or grandfather. Although there are signs that he has taken steps to purge the regime of opponents and bring in supporters, Kim Chong-un has not had time to develop a strong patronage system. In addition, at the time of this study (October 2011), Kim Chong-un is still in his 20s. As a consequence, in the event of Kim Chong-il's demise in the near term, power would likely be dispersed, with individuals—such as Chang Song-taek, Kim Kyong-hui, Choe Ryong-hae, and O Kuk-yol—taking responsibility for various portfolios.⁵¹ This could make decision-making on anything other than issues of regime survival extremely difficult. Even though the Third Party Conference apparently has reestablished much of

⁵¹ One prominent South Korean Pyongyang watcher believes that Kim Chong-un will have approximately six months to consolidate his position after his father dies before splits begin appearing within the senior leadership around him. Author's discussion with the director of the Institute for National Security Strategy, October 2011.

the formal leadership apparatus that had deteriorated during the Kim Chong-il era, there is a real potential for disagreement and dissension between the successor and the collective leadership and within the collective leadership.⁵²

This leadership configuration would face some unique problems in its ability to survive over the long term. First, the continuation of the Kim regime would make it difficult for this leadership to shed the ideological baggage needed to undertake meaningful reforms. The perpetuation of *Chuche* and *Kimilsungism* would harden the boundaries within which policymaking takes place, thus making it difficult for leaders with contrary opinions to emerge.⁵³ In addition, for the successor to rule, a campaign of deification would have to take place, and such a campaign would be highly unlikely to tolerate any criticism of the Kim Chong-il era.⁵⁴

The second problem would arise if the center of the collective leadership did not hold. Despite Kim Chong-il's efforts to build a cohesive group around Kim Chong-un, it is made up of powerful individuals, who might fiercely disagree on policy and might even harbor power aspirations of their own. If the collective leadership (or elements within it) were to take actions to undermine or even remove Kim's successor, the power struggle could be fierce and potentially rip the regime apart.

Therefore, in this scenario, a crisis might not emerge in the wake of Kim Chong-il's death. In fact, the succession could occur smoothly, and then be followed months later by dissension as the collective leadership fell prey to factionalism—which would further weaken the regime and could potentially lead to its demise and the ensuing crisis.

⁵² There are some reports that Kim Chong-un is headstrong and difficult to manage. While Chang Song-taek may have accepted responsibility for his grooming, their relationship is unclear.

⁵³ It is important to note that most of the North Korean public does not know about the existence of Kim Chong-il's sons, even their names. While a campaign appears to have begun within the elite to socialize the choice of Kim Chong-un as successor, it will take years to raise him to the level of deification throughout society. See "Brother-in-Law Seen as Having Gained Real Power in DPRK," *AERA*, 20 April 2009; and "Morning Star General to Turn Water into Wine," *The Daily NK*, 15 May 2009.

⁵⁴ Contrary to Western perceptions, Kim Chong-il does not rely on his family name for legitimacy. In fact, the regime usually downplays the fact that he is Kim Il-sung's son. The central media instead focuses on his rise to power as being a consequence of his leadership qualities. Presumably a similar campaign will surround his successor.

Indicators of an impending crisis in scenario 1

In scenario 1, the following political, socio-economic, and military and security indicators would point to a crisis:

Political indicators:

- Failure of successor to appear at key state events⁵⁵
- Unexplained disappearance of successor from public view
- Changes in pattern of guidance inspections to military units
- Restriction of troop movements inside Pyongyang (such as not participating in national day parades)⁵⁶
- Hints in the North Korean press that call into question the wisdom of previous policies
- Oblique criticism of *Chuche*, *Kimilsungism*, and/or the military-first policy
- Signs of a struggle between the KWP's administration and Organization/Guidance departments
- The military's open criticism of the cabinet for wrong-headed economic policy
- Senior-level purges, possibly including the Politburo and NDC
- Emergence of factionalism within the elite

⁵⁵ Rumors about Kim's health were bolstered when he did not attend the 60th anniversary of the founding of the North Korean government on 9 September 2008. He had attended the 50th and 55th anniversaries, and the 60th anniversaries hold special significance in Asian culture. Kim had attended the commemorative meetings and parades marking the 60th founding anniversaries for both the party (10 October 2005) and the military (25 April 1992). In addition, September has typically been an active month for Kim. From 1999 to 2007, he engaged in an average of three public activities from 1 to 9 September. After his stroke in August 2008, the central media did not observe him partaking in public activities until October.

⁵⁶ According to some reporting, KPA forces did not participate in the parade in Kim Il-sung Plaza to mark the 60th anniversary of the founding of the North Korean government. The parade was restricted to the Worker-Peasant Red Guard. If true, this was a departure from past parades commemorating this event.

- A meeting of the KWP Central Committee convened

Socio-economic indicators:

- Conflicting stories in the North Korean press regarding the need for reforms
- Increased black market activity
- Internal economic activity increasingly limited to hard currency and barter transactions
- Government attempts to crack down on corruption
- Increase in stories of public defiance (graffiti, jokes, defacing of monuments)

Military and security indicators:

- Restriction of troop movements inside Pyongyang (such as not participating in national day parades)
- Enhanced security around military facilities
- Increased rigidity in foreign policy positions
- Increase in brinkmanship tactics
- Possible withdrawal from international forums (e.g., the Six Party Talks, KEDO)
- Public violence against mid-level government officials

Managing a crisis in scenario 1

This crisis would not likely be sudden; rather, it would unfold over several months. There is probably enough connective tissue within the North Korean leadership structures to prevent a situation from spinning out of control. After all, North Korean leaders are evolving toward a new leadership configuration, as opposed to creating one within the context of a crisis (such as a coup against Kim Chong-il).

If a crisis occurred in this scenario, the major question facing the international community would be, What caused it? Was it necessitated by the North Korean leadership's rejection of the hereditary succession? Did it result from a battle within the collective leadership over policy direction? Was it an attempt from a powerful individual

or group of individuals within the collective leadership to usurp power? Depending on the reason, the new leadership configuration could be more or less inclined toward reform and engagement with the outside world. In the worst-case scenario, the regime would be unable to transform itself in the aftermath of the loss of legitimacy and would descend into political chaos.

The international community should monitor the situation closely and be alert for attempts by the North Korean regime to make diplomatic overtures. If such overtures are forthcoming, most likely through China, countries such as the United States and South Korea would probably be best served by quiet diplomacy so as not to disturb the sensitive dynamics unfolding within the North Korean leadership.

Scenario 2: Collapse of the Kim regime and replacement by another, weak regime

As noted above, a true dynastic succession in the near future is unlikely and even if it were to occur, it would be fraught with complications. Another possibility is that the Kim regime would end (or at best be represented by a figure head) and be replaced by another leadership configuration, either through the death of Kim Chong-il or by a coup d'état.⁵⁷ This could result in a minimally functioning state on the edge of collapse. Two leadership configurations in particular could result from such an outcome: collective leadership or the rise of a strongman.

Scenario 2a: Collective leadership

Before the recent focus on the third son, some Pyongyang watchers believed that Kim Chong-il had abandoned the notion of dynastic succession in favor of a “military-centered” collective leadership. While this speculation was based on no obvious evidence, it seemed to fit the moves to enhance the NDC that were seen in 2007, as the NDC would likely serve as the forum for such a leadership. After the Third Party Conference, it is

⁵⁷ The possibility of a coup in North Korea is hard to envision, but not impossible. Most observers tend to envision a scenario whereby elite disgruntlement reaches a breaking point and Kim is assassinated or physically removed from power. It is also possible to conceive his downfall resulting from a protest spreading, most likely in the provinces, and the military and security forces being unwilling or unable to contain it. Such a spread of unrest could impact the elites' views of the regime and lead key leaders to conclude that Kim is vulnerable.

more likely that the collective leadership would be housed within the party, either in the Politburo or the Central Military Committee.

Today, a collective response to Kim Chong-il's sudden death or removal without a dynastic component is a possibility given the right circumstances. Kim's ability to manage the succession could become compromised as he grows weaker and becomes hostage to a leadership that prefers to forgo another dynastic transfer of power.⁵⁸ This scenario could also emerge if Kim dies or is removed before the succession plan is firmly established, thus leaving his chosen heir apparent vulnerable to powerful competing forces. Even though Kim Chong-un has been appointed as a vice chairman of the KWP Central Military Committee, it does not mean that he has in any way consolidated his power or established his legitimacy as the heir apparent. This will take time as the regime moves through the second phase of the succession.

An examination of the Politburo and Central Military Committee rosters in the aftermath of the Third Party Conference suggests a variety of individuals and power groupings that could play a prominent role in any near term succession.

The Politburo Presidium was reconstituted, having been reduced over the years to just Kim Chong-il. Joining Kim were Kim Yong-nam (President of the SPA Presidium), Choe Yong-rim (Premier), VMAR Cho Myong-nok (Director of the KPA General Political Bureau), and VMAR Ri Yong-ho (Chief of the General Staff). The presence of two military officers on the party's highest decision-making body was a clear indicator of Kim Chong-il's strategy to tie the concept of the Party Center to military-first politics.⁵⁹ Ri Yong-ho's appointment was particularly interesting since he was believed by many Pyongyang watchers to be serving as a military escort for the heir apparent, much as O Chin-u had done for Kim Chong-il.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ When Kim Chong-il was made heir apparent, there were many in the KPA who opposed the dynastic succession. Kim Il-sung turned to O Chin-u to build consensus within the military behind Kim Chong-il. According to several North Korean defectors, the military again may be raising questions about dynastic succession. This may be the reason for Kim Yong-chun's elevation in status. He is allegedly a close confidant of Kim Chong-il and a supporter of the third son.

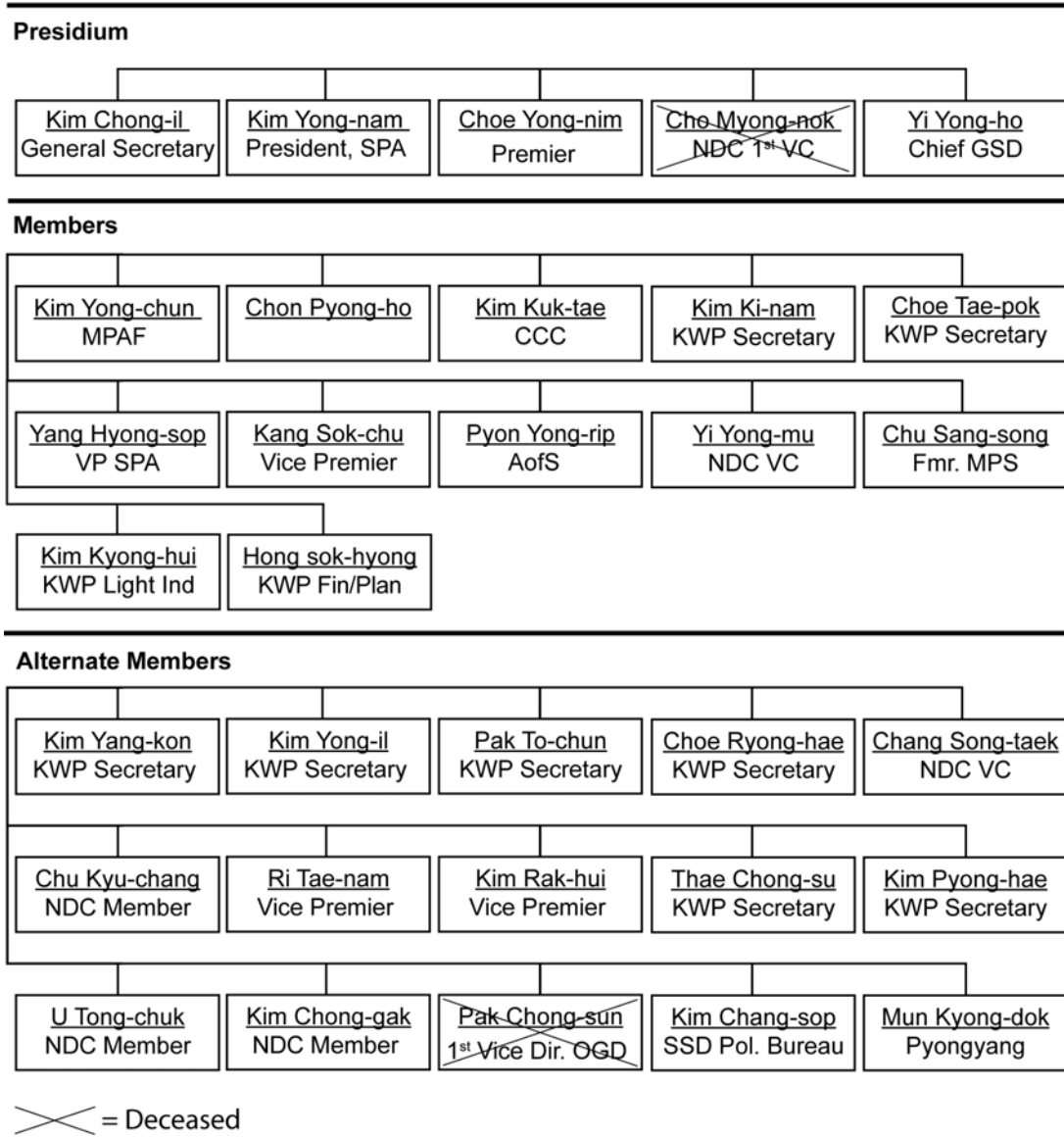
⁵⁹ Cho Myong-nok died shortly after the conference. His position has not been filled as of October 2011.

⁶⁰ Ri Yong-ho is a descendant of one of the founding families of the regime. His father, Ri Pong-su, was a member of the Partisan Guerrilla Faction who enjoyed a close relationship with Kim Il-sung. Some Pyongyang watchers have predicted that Ri Yong-ho will in the future replace Kim Yong-chun as Minister of People's Armed Forces.

The appointments to the Politburo did not constitute a generational shift many had expected. The average age of the 37 members was 74, with 12 being in their 80s. The youngest member was 53. Most of the appointments were drawn from Kim's inner circle of close aides and family. Kim Kyong-hui (Kim's sister) was made a full member, while Chang Song-taek (Kim's brother-in-law) became an alternate member, further backing speculation that they would serve as patrons to their nephew. Several of Chang Song-taek's protégés were also made members and alternate members, such as the Minister of People's Security Chu Sang Song, the Director of the SSD U Tong-chuk, and Choe Ryong-hae, the new KWP Secretary for military affairs. Pak Chong-sun, first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department and reportedly one of the facilitators of the Kim Chong-un succession, was also made an alternate member. It is also worth noting that 10 of the 12 members of the NDC were represented in the new Politburo lineup, thus bringing under the wing of the party many of the powerful military and defense industry elites within the leadership.⁶¹

⁶¹ Besides Kim Chong-il, the other NDC members to also hold a position in the Politburo include: Cho Myong-nok (first vice chairman of the NDC), Chang Song-taek (Vice Chairman of the NDC), Kim Yong-chun (Vice Chairman of the NDC), Ri Yong-mu (Vice Chairman of the NDC), Chon Pyong-ho (member of the NDC, later retired from the body), Chu Sang-song (member of the NDC), Chu Kyu-chang (member of the NDC), U Tong-chuk (member of the NDC), and Kim Chong-gak (member of the NDC). It is worth noting that O Kuk-yol (Vice chairman of the NDC) was not appointed to the Politburo, raising questions for many Pyongyang watchers regarding his continued influence.

Figure 2. Politburo



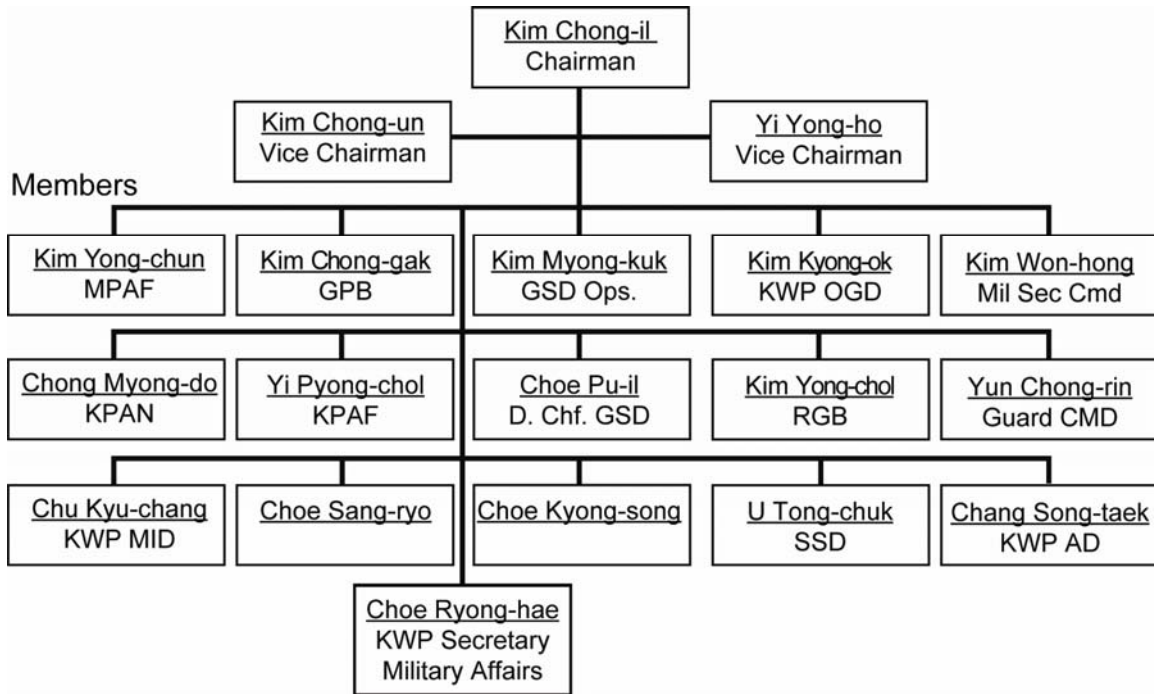
Another leading party body to be reinvigorated was the Central Military Committee.⁶² The Third Party Conference dramatically overhauled the Central Military Committee, boosting its membership to 19 members. The most significant move was the appointment of Kim Chong-un and Ri Yong-ho as vice chairmen. Other than membership in the Central Committee, this was the heir apparent's only official title, lending credence to the speculation that the succession was being firmly nested within the party apparatus, but tied to military-first politics.

The other appointments to the Central Military Committee seemed designed to both formalize the regime's control networks within the armed forces, as well as give Kim Chong-un access to a variety of patronage systems that could assist him in consolidating his power. In terms of operational lines of control, the new membership included the minister of People's Armed Forces (VMAR Kim Yong-chun), chief of the General Staff's Operations Bureau (Gen. Kim Myong-guk), the commanders of the Air Force and Navy (Gen. Ri Pyong-chol and ADM Chong Myong-do), the heads of important special forces units (Lt. Gen. Kim Yong-chol and Col. Gen. Choe Kyong-song), and key members of the General Staff (Gen. Choe Pu-il and Col. Gen. Choe Sang-ryo). Other members held military and security portfolios within the party apparatus, including: Gen. Choe Ryong-hae (KWP Secretary for Military Affairs), Chu Kyu-chang (director of the KWP Munitions Industry Department), Chang Song-taek (director of the KWP Administrative Department), and Gen. Kim Kyong-ok (first vice director of the KWP Organization Guidance Department). The four remaining members (Gen. Kim Chong-gak, Gen. Kim Won-hong, Gen. Yun Chong-rin, and Gen. U Tong-chuk) held important security-related portfolios.⁶³

⁶² According to Article 27 of the KWP constitution, the Central Military Committee oversees implementation of the party's military policies, guides development and production of munitions, and has command and control over North Korea's armed forces. Established in 1962, the KWP Central Military Committee also has a ceremonial role. It sponsors the armed forces day celebrations. Since 1995, the CMC has issued all congratulatory messages to all military events, something the KWP used to do prior to 1995. See Hyeong Jung Park and Kyo Duk Lee, *Continuities and Changes in the Power Structure and the Role of Party Organizations Under Kim Jong Il's Reign*. Studies Series 05-05 (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification May 2005).

⁶³ Of interest to Pyongyang watchers was the absence of several influential members of the high command and defense and security establishments such as: Cho Myong-nok, O Kuk-yol, and Ri Yong-mu (NDC vice chairmen); Paek Se-bong (NDC member and chairman of the Second Economic Committee); Chu Sang-song (NDC member and Minister of People's Security), Ri Myong-su and Hyon Chol-hae (NDC directors). For some, their ages and health apparently disqualified them. For others, the reason was less clear and could have been tied to their lack of close relations with the Kim family.

Figure 3. Central Military Committee



As Kim Chong-il has taken measures to bring a number of powerful individuals and patronage systems under the party umbrella in order to harness the leadership dynamics into a more manageable structure for his successor, he has not guaranteed a smooth transfer of power in the longer term. The current leadership configuration (especially Chang Song-taek's presence) within the party ensures at least some horizontal and vertical cooperation throughout the state, party, and military/security apparatuses. But, unlike the previous scenario, in which the collective leadership would serve as a support mechanism for a successor, the alliances within this collective leadership would most likely be more tenuous, based on a shared, but temporary, common purpose.

As in the previous scenario, the collective leadership would face a challenge in holding itself together. It would likely come under pressure as powerful individuals and factions struggled to consolidate more power in their hands. According to some sources, Kim Chong-il's chief lieutenants, such as Chang Song-taek and O Kuk-yol (who is not in the party leadership, but still holds a critical position within the NDC), are possible

candidates to compete for the role of first among equals if not for outright control.⁶⁴ If this were to occur, North Korean regime politics could quickly descend into chaos—the consequences of which are hard to predict.

Scenario 2b: Rise of a strongman

In 2006, the ROK National Assembly Intelligence Committee produced a 100-page report entitled *DPRK Crisis Management System and ROK Response Plan*, which described the probable crisis management system that would come into play if “sudden changes occurred in North Korea.” The report suggested the possibility of a strongman succeeding Kim Chong-il.

If a strongman were going to emerge, he would do so either rapidly, in the hours after Kim’s death, or more slowly as part of a power struggle. The rapid securing of power in the hands of one person would depend on that person’s ability to secure key command, communication, and control nodes inside Pyongyang, including the MPAF situation room, the Guard Command C2 center, and the local branches of the SSD, Military Security Command, and Ministry of People’s Security. O Kuk-yol oversees North Korea’s most elite special operations forces. The fact that some of these forces are apparently dedicated to protecting the Supreme Leader would suggest that they would have advance warning of a crisis. O Kuk-yol might be able to secure the support of the military and security forces: he sits in the NDC and enjoys respect throughout the KPA, having served as head of the Air Force and chief of the General Staff, and he has promoted many of the current leaders in the KPA. His age (78), however, might limit his tenure.

Another person who could act quickly is Gen. Kim Myong-kuk, the director of the General Staff’s Operation Bureau. He held this position in 1994 when Kim Il-sung died and would be familiar with the key nodes that would need to be secured. He also has widespread contacts throughout the KPA; however, his contacts inside the Praetorian Guard are unclear.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See “Kim Chong-il’s Brother-in-Law Seen as Having Gained Real Power,” *AERA*, 20 April 2009; “DPRK’s O Kuk-yol Emerges as Second in Power, May Pose Threat to Leader,” *Chosun Ilbo*, 25 April 2009.

⁶⁵ Kim Myong-kuk has been the source of much speculation. Photographs of him in the North Korean press suggested that he was demoted around November 2009, probably in response to the poor showing of the North Korean forces in a clash with South Korean vessels in the West Sea. In March, shortly after the sinking of the *Cheonan*, photographs suggested that Kim had been restored in rank.

Although not positioned to act quickly in the event of Kim Chong-il's death, another group of individuals could emerge as major players if a power struggle ensued. The so-called "group of five" individuals (Chang Song-taek, Ri Che-kang, Hyon Chol-hae, Ri Myong-su, and Ri Chae-il) are rumored to be power holders based on their proximity to Kim Chong-il.⁶⁶ According to reporting in the region, Chang Song-taek has at times been involved in a power struggle with Hyon Chol-hae and Ri Myong-su, powerful individuals within the NDC apparatus, over control of the succession.⁶⁷ This struggle, some contend, partly explains the inconsistent policymaking that has come out of Pyongyang in recent months.⁶⁸

If a strongman were to evolve from a power struggle (or a consensus-building process) within the leadership, it would likely happen after a period of collective leadership. Competition within (and even outside) the collective would probably emerge as parochial interests began to trump the natural tendency to coalesce for the preservation of larger interests of regime stability. At this point, the scenario could go in one of two directions: it could become either a full-blown power struggle or a managed struggle within the collective. If the former, the struggle would likely be drawn out and bloody. The potential for regime instability is real. For this reason, given the regime's desire for stability and maintenance of the status quo, this power struggle might soon give way to a consensus-building phase in order to allow a strongman to emerge.⁶⁹ In this scenario, the party and

⁶⁶ One needs to be careful about ascribing too much power to North Korean figures based solely on the number of times they accompany Kim Chong-il on guidance inspections. Several other sources of information should be used to make assumptions regarding an individual's influence. This is a shortcoming in the Pyongyang-watching methodologies currently in vogue. Ken E. Gause, *Pyongyang Watching and the Need for New Leadership Analysis Techniques* (unpublished paper for the Smith Richardson Foundation, November 2008).

⁶⁷ Hyon Chol-hae and Ri Myong-su were allegedly involved in the *omonimu* ("mother") campaign several years ago to venerate Ko Yong-hui. Ri Myong-su also heads the NDC Administration Bureau where Kim Chong-un is rumored to be working. See "Power Struggle Behind DPRK's Nuclear Test," *Sapio*, 24 June 2009; "Kim Chong-un Assigned to the Top Military Organization, NDC Administration Bureau," *Sankei Shimbun*, 10 June 2009. According to one North Korean source, these reports of a power struggle are erroneous. He notes that as long as Kim Chong-il is alive, such a power struggle could not take place. In addition, Hyon Chol-hae and Ri Myong-su do not have the power and influence to be engaged in such a struggle. Discussion with the author, 27 June 2009.

⁶⁸ According to one report, Chang Song-taek opposed both the missile nuclear tests in 2009. His arguments against testing were overruled by more extreme hard-line military elements within the NDC. See "Power Struggle Behind DPRK's Nuclear Test, op. cit."

⁶⁹ North Korea's culture of conformity would likely force the leadership to look for avenues of stability. After all, the power brokers inside this regime are intimately tied to the existing power

NDC would focus on choosing someone who could promote regime stability and cohesion. The following table gives information on each member of the elite who might emerge as a strongman.

Table 4. Members of the elite who could emerge as a strongman

Name	Position	Path to power	Comments
VMAR Kim Yong-chun	MPAF, Vice Chairman of the NDC, Politburo Member, CMC Member	KWP and NDC consensus building	Close to KCI, with strong ties within the senior military leadership. His ability to hold power for very long is questionable.
Chang Song-taek	Director KWP Administration Department and NDC Vice Chairman, Politburo Alternate Member	Ties to Kim family, KWP consensus building or power struggle	Brother-in-law of KCI. Ties to North Korea's surveillance apparatus. Extensive personal patronage system that extends to the KPA.
Gen. O Kuk-yol	Vice Chairman of NDC	O family critical for Kim family control for decades. Seize power or power struggle	Control over powerful elements of the Praetorian Guard. Extensive ties to the KPA down to the corps level. However, also the source of much opposition within the regime.
Gen. Kim Myong-kuk	Director GSD Operations Bureau, CMC Member	Seize power	Sits at the center of various military and security C2 hubs. Rumored to have an extensive patronage system within the KPA. Ties to KWP, however, are suspect.
Kim Yong-nam	SPA President	KWP consensus building	Head of state. Linked by family to key power centers in the KWP and KPA. At most, a transitional figure.

structure and they would be leery of taking steps that would cause it irreparable damage. For this reason, any future power struggles could probably be contained before they strayed beyond the bounds deemed acceptable by the regime.

Kim Ok	KCI's Technical Secretary and Mistress	Seize power or power struggle	Key links into Kim family apparatus. Ties to NDC. May try to play role in early days of succession. Lack of patronage system will likely marginalize her influence over time. However, her status within the leadership has been in question since late 2009 after reports surfaced that she may have left Kim Chong-il's side in an arranged marriage to a KWP official.
Gen. Kim Chong-gak	First Vice Director of GPB, Member of NDC, Politburo Alternate Member, CMC Member	KWP-NDC consensus building or power struggle	Cho Myong-nok's second in command. GPB has oversight role in KPA. While he is a military figure on the rise, his patronage ties are unclear.
Gen. Hyon Chol-hae	Deputy Chief of the NDC Standing Bureau	Seize power or power struggle	Ties to the GPB. Oversees daily affairs of the NDC. Frequently accompanies KCI on guidance inspections. Reported rival of Chang Song-taek.
Gen. Ri Myong-su	Minister of People's Security	Seize power or power struggle	Former head of GSD's Operations Bureau. Used to oversee administrative affairs of the NDC. Frequently accompanies KCI on guidance inspections. Reported rival of Chang Song-taek.

Before a successor to Kim Chong-il is announced, all sources of opposition will need to be eliminated, or at least curbed. This probably means that the announcement of Kim Chong-il's death or removal will be delayed for some time, possibly weeks. Although Cho

Myong-nok, as First Vice Chairman of the NDC, would be the obvious choice for strongman, his poor health suggests that Kim Yong-chun, who also sits on both the NDC and CMC, would become the likely candidate. Obviously, Chang Song-taek is another possibility, given his ties outside the NDC and connections to the Kim family apparatus—the control over which will be critical for any new leader. It is uncertain whether an emergent strongman would also carry the title of Supreme Commander, given the fact that the KWP’s Central Military Committee is in charge of designating this post.

Characteristics and indicators of scenario 2

Under these leadership configurations, the regime would continue, but—at least in the near term—in a more fragile state. In the absence of a strong, unified patronage system, the new leadership would have to spend time consolidating its power—something that would be extremely difficult given the fact that in either case (collective leadership or strongman), the fundamental North Korean authority structure would have changed. Ever since Kim Il-sung began to consolidate his power in the 1950s, North Korean ideology has preached the sanctity of the Supreme Leader, which all aspects of society and politics, including the Korean Workers’ Party, must support and defend. If the new regime were to eschew the Third Hereditary Succession, it would invalidate Kimilsungism, a major tenet of North Korea’s ideology. This could raise the issue of legitimacy, thus making it difficult for the new regime to garner loyalty throughout the system and assert effective domestic control.

Because of the sensitive domestic situation, the regime would probably not embark on any significant policy changes, especially in the economic and political spheres. While it’s possible that the new regime would embark on some diplomatic initiatives to relieve pressure on the regime, maintaining the status quo in terms of regime security and control would likely trump any bold measures and might even lead to roll-backs in existing areas of cooperation and engagement with the outside world.

This scenario could evolve into a crisis if the new regime were unable to maintain effective political, economic, social, and military control, and became more unstable in the weeks and months following the fall of the Kim regime.

Indicators of an impending crisis in scenario 2

In scenario 2, the following political, socio-economic, and military and security indicators would point to a crisis:

Political indicators:

- Emergency meeting of the Politburo and CMC
- Vilification of Kim legacy
- Inconsistencies in North Korean media
- Sudden shifts in leadership bodies (NDC, KWP Secretariat, high command, security organizations)
- Massive purge, possibly including the Politburo, CMC, and NDC
- Significant KWP/government reorganization involving chains of command/authority
- Funeral list designating change in formal leadership
- Increased defections of high-ranking officials and military officers to China, South Korea, and Russia
- Call for unity of the KWP
- Possible convening of the KWP Central Committee
- Emergence of factionalism within the elite

Socio-economic indicators:

- Increased refugee flows to China, the Russian Far East, and South Korea despite government efforts
- Government control increasingly limited to major urban areas
- Increased black market activity
- Internal economic activity increasingly limited to hard currency and barter transactions
- Government attempts to crack down on corruption

- Disruption in Office 39 activity abroad as chains of command are broken⁷⁰

Military and security indicators:

- Conflicting and inconsistent policy initiatives
- Conflict among security agencies
- Restriction of troop movements inside Pyongyang (such as not participating in national day parades)
- Enhanced security around military facilities
- Purges within the elite, especially within the military and security sectors
- Potential increase in number of military and security officials in key KWP posts
- Increased rigidity in foreign policy positions
- Increase in brinkmanship tactics⁷¹
- Possible withdrawal from international forums (e.g., the Six Party Talks, KEDO)
- State of emergency declared; possible termination of international telephone lines and telephone lines of foreign missions in Pyongyang
- Attempts to restrict internal travel.

Managing a crisis in scenario 2

The ability of a neighboring country to manage this crisis—in which one regime has collapsed and has been replaced by an unstable successor—would depend on whether it had established connections with members of the North Korean elite before the death or ouster of Kim Chong-il. Such connections could be achieved by state-to-state and state-to-province engagement with North Korea across a number of areas, including the economy

⁷⁰ Office 39 is the party office dedicated to securing hard currency and luxury goods for the Kim family.

⁷¹ North Korea tends to resort to these tactics during times of crisis inside the regime. In 1994, Pyongyang increased its military rhetoric to ensure that regional powers did not take advantage of Kim Il-sung's death.

and security, or through relationships with key individuals who are deemed likely to step into any future power vacuum. There are rumors that China has some relationships with key members of the North Korean military and security apparatus. It would not be surprising if South Korea (either through government or private channels) also enjoys similar contacts. Trading on these relationships in the early days and weeks of a new, potentially less stable, North Korean regime would be critical to reducing the paranoia that might exist within the new leadership, thus increasing the chance for outside assistance to be funneled into the country in order to prevent a potential humanitarian catastrophe. If the new regime were made up of hard-liners intent on closing off the country, aid might not be possible; however, existing channels into the regime could be used to pass messages to the new leadership, to ensure that it did not push beyond red lines (especially military ones) that could make the situation less stable.⁷²

Once the situation had stabilized, the international community would have to decide how to deal with a new regime in Pyongyang. The leadership configuration, as well as its decision-making dynamics, would have changed dramatically from the Kim regime. Identifying the critical decision-making nodes, as well as the regime's level of tolerance for change and reform, would be important to determining a way forward. At this point, engagement across the board to promote moderation and long-term adaptation in North Korea might be the best possible option for moving forward. At best, this could ultimately bring about leadership in North Korea that would have a more benign view of the external world. At worst, it could lay the foundation for a soft landing if the regime ultimately did collapse.

Scenario 3: Collapse of the Kim regime followed by chaos

Ultimately, the North Korean regime is a system that comes together at one point: Kim Chong-il. When he is removed, the stability of the system will depend on whether the center holds or whether the connective tissue designed to make the regime operate dissolves under the weight of factionalism and infighting within the leadership.

⁷² A concern is that as North Korea descends into a power struggle, its ability to judge red lines (both its own and those of the regional powers) may become blurred. This possibility becomes more likely if no other countries are engaging with the North Korean leadership during this period. Joseph Bermudez refers to North Korea's "Lens of Self Deception," which often leads North Korea to take actions not in its best interest. See Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., *North Korea's Strategic Culture* (paper prepared for Defense Threat Reduction Agency, October 31, 2006).

The possibility of regime collapse upon Kim's death is deemed unlikely by many Pyongyang watchers because there is the *assumption* that enough connective tissue exists within the leadership structure to sustain the shock.⁷³ The revitalization of the party leadership apparatus would seem to ensure that a continuity of governance plan or set of procedures is in place to ensure a smooth transfer of power.⁷⁴ If, however, this plan is not fully established or falls apart because of factional infighting before it is implemented, the potential for chaos and uncertainty will creep into the succession process, which could ultimately lead to a crisis.⁷⁵

Although speculative, some Pyongyang watchers believe that key individuals and institutions would take several steps in the interim period between Kim's death or incapacitation and the implementation of the succession.

- The first people to know of a change in Kim's health would probably be his personal secretariat (including Kim Ok) and the Guard Command, which is responsible for his personal security. These individuals presumably have daily contact with Kim and would likely take charge of the situation and serve as the initial reporting channel on his health condition. It is argued, however, that Yun Chong-rin, the director of the Guard Command (or possibly the General Guard Bureau) would likely initiate reporting through KWP channels, alerting the Organization Guidance Department. Close Kim family members might also be privy to this news.

⁷³ Many Chinese North Korea watchers are in the forefront cautioning that policy should not be built upon the presumption that the Kim regime will collapse in the near future. They point out that while Beijing and Washington may share the prognosis that North Korea faces a long-term crisis that may lead to gradual collapse, China is much less willing to embrace a scenario whereby political and economic forces will cause the regime to unravel in the near-term (next five to seven years). This in part explains China's apparent view that engagement, not pressure, is the best way for dealing with North Korea. Author's interviews in Beijing, May 2011.

⁷⁴ Some sources say that, for a long time, Kim banned any discussions of succession and prevented a contingency plan from being developed because it could potentially undermine his authority. These prohibitions appear to have fallen away since his stroke.

⁷⁵ Many Pyongyang watchers think that North Korea's increasingly belligerent actions in the international arena are tied to the succession. While some suggest that this is a campaign by Kim to build support for his chosen heir, others believe it might be the regime's way of keeping the international community off balance so that it cannot take advantage of North Korea during a period of vulnerability caused by a power struggle over the succession. If it is the latter, the post-Kim leadership configuration may still not be decided.

- The OGD would inform key members of the KWP apparatus, the titular head of state (Kim Yong-nam), the party leadership, and conceivably the NDC.
- At this point, events would depend on whether a collective leadership already existed to conduct the day-to-day affairs of the regime. If not, several key KWP and KPA leaders might meet to discuss how to move forward. They would likely follow procedures similar to those implemented when Kim is away from Pyongyang on extended foreign or domestic travel.
- This interim leadership configuration could last for only a short time before other senior party, state, and military leaders would need to be contacted. This larger interim leadership group would be responsible for ensuring the succession process.

This interim period would likely be a very fragile time for the North Korean leadership. After all, any interim leadership configuration would likely be under considerable pressure from internal power centers. Kim Chong-il's management style has already weakened the bureaucracy, and a prolonged stalemate at the top could cause the transitional government to fracture and fall apart.

Characteristics and indicators of scenario 3

It is difficult to predict the conditions under which North Korea could collapse. Though the defining context might be economic, the precipitating factor (as in Romania's case) would very likely be political (i.e., conflict within the leadership).⁷⁶

If Kim were to die or otherwise suddenly be removed from power, regime stability initially would depend on how fast the leadership could resolve the succession crisis. If the transition in power were slow and possibly contentious, the system could unravel.⁷⁷ That

⁷⁶ One must be careful not to draw too many comparisons between Ceausescu's Romania and Kim Chong-il's North Korea. The Romanian regime collapsed in 1989 in the midst of a destabilizing transformation that was sweeping Eastern Europe—a situation that North Korea does not face today. In addition, North Korea does not suffer from some of the internal problems faced by the Romanian leadership, such as the Hungarian minority, which helped spark the events of 1989.

⁷⁷ According to most scholars interviewed for this study, Kim Chong-un is not likely to have the same ability as his father to survive as a dictator. He has limited ability to control the influential elite and strongmen inside Pyongyang. There is a good chance that two to three years after Kim Chong-il's death, leadership cohesion will begin to fray, leaving open the possibility for civil unrest. See also

“Experts: Kim Chong-un on a Hiding to Nothing,” *The Daily NK*, 27 October 2011.

could lead to instability and a high likelihood of civil unrest, which could result in mass rebellion. If the ruling elite decided that total breakdown was imminent and then sought asylum in other countries, the national government could collapse, accompanied by the breakdown of the internal security apparatus. This would lead to chaos in the country as some of the population might begin to fight for limited resources and other segments would begin the inevitable migration north across the Tumen and Yalu rivers, south across the DMZ, and even afloat in a “boat people” phenomenon—all searching for a place where they could acquire the basic necessities of life.

Given current leadership dynamics inside North Korea, this does not appear to be a likely scenario for the near future.⁷⁸ If, however, Kim were to die in the midst of internal chaos within the country—caused by, say, a flood or another famine—it would not be impossible.⁷⁹

Indicators of an impending crisis in scenario 3

In scenario 3, the following political, socio-economic, and military and security indicators would point to a crisis:

Political indicators:

- Signals in official media of a sudden leadership turnover, both at senior levels and within the second and third echelons
- Prolonged absence of key government, party, and military leaders from public view
- Increase in corruption among officials
- Reports of executions of party leaders for corruption

⁷⁸ For an assessment of the control mechanisms that have prevented regime collapse, see “Why Has the Kim Jong Il Regime Not Collapsed?” *Taikitachosen Chugoku Kimitsu Fairu*, 15 September 2007.

⁷⁹ Some North Korea watchers believe that an apocalyptic scenario is more likely today than it has been at any time in the past. By many accounts, the centrally controlled economy has ceased to exist and food distribution is nearing a breaking point. Regime loyalty is also at an all-time low, as evidenced by the fact that over 2,000 North Korean refugees entered South Korea in 2007—whereas in 1995, only 41 were able to reach the South. See *Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor*, a joint paper by USIP and CSIS (January 3, 2008). See also Robert D. Kaplan, “When North Korea Falls,” *The Atlantic* (October 2006).

- Movement of officials and their families out of Pyongyang
- Increased defections of North Korean elite to such countries as China, Russia, and South Korea

Socio-economic indicators:

- Before the collapse, continued decline in grain harvests and increasing requests for food and related humanitarian assistance
- Steadily increasing refugee flows to China, the Russian Far East, Japan, and South Korea, with little indication of government attempts to intervene⁸⁰
- Widespread movement of population within country in search of food despite government efforts to restrict it
- Movement of money out of North Korea by elite⁸¹
- Reports of elite having problems acquiring food
- Initial government attempts to liberalize restrictions on economic activity
- Failure of the state to pay salaries of government workers and military
- Reports of rebellions and riots throughout the country
- Increase in escapes from North Korean prisons and the gulag
- Reports of protests in urban centers
- Reports of “antisocialist crimes,” including official corruption, “hooliganism,” prostitution, theft, and defacing of monuments
- Reports of widespread public executions

⁸⁰ A collapse of the regime would not necessarily cause a flood of refugees to head toward China and South Korea. If they were not harassed or threatened, most people would probably remain in place until forced to move in search of food. Discussion with North Korean source, June 2009.

⁸¹ According to some sources, Kim Chong-il is in the process of moving financial resources to ensure that his assets are portable should he have to go into exile. See “Clock Ticking for Kim’s Korea,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 30 January 2008.

Military and security indicators:

- Sudden break-off of negotiations or interaction with the outside world
- Unusual military and security apparatus appointments
- Augmentation of security services to maintain control
- Enhanced security around military bases
- Reports of executions of military officers
- Reports of mutinies within military units
- Attempts to seal the borders
- Breakdown in border security

Managing a crisis in scenario 3

A collapse of the North Korean system, in the worst-case scenario, would occur rapidly and with little warning. Crisis management under these circumstances might be relegated to controlling the disorder and managing cooperation among neighboring countries to deal with the unfolding situation. Having plans that could quickly be put into place to deal with food distribution and refugee flows would lessen panic and facilitate stabilization measures.

For South Korea in particular, plans and policies would need to be in place to deal with the aftermath of a collapsed or failed North Korea. While not a part of the initial crisis management stage, in the early days following the collapse of North Korea, attention would have to be paid to the eventual integration (possibly reunification) of the two Koreas.⁸² A high-priority task in the integration stage would be the reconstruction of the North Korean economy and infrastructure. Therefore, it would be important to take steps in the crisis management stage to ensure that North Koreans would stay in their country and not flow into South Korea in overwhelming numbers.

⁸² South Korea's point man on North Korea policy, Yu Woo-ik, recently said his government is planning to set up a fund as early as this year (2011) to start raising 55 trillion won (US\$49.4 billion) to help pay for its eventual reunification with the North. See "S. Korea Plans to Create 55 Trn Won Fund For Unification With N. Korea," Yonhap, 01 November 2011.

Scenario 4: Collapse of the Kim regime followed by conflict

Many scholars believe that if North Korea faced regime collapse, it might lash out at the countries around it, including an attack on South Korea.⁸³ They point to North Korea's still sizeable military and firepower.⁸⁴ However, this scenario is debatable, especially in terms of a weakening North Korean leadership's ability to enforce command and control to conduct such operations. A much less studied, but perhaps more plausible, scenario would involve the outbreak of conflict inside North Korea, which could potentially spill across the country's borders. As noted earlier, the North Korean regime is characterized by competition among individuals and organizations. In the past, this competition has allegedly led to conflict, as evidenced by the 1995 clash between the Sixth and Seventh corps. In addition, there is the potential for warlordism to emerge in the wake of Kim Chong-il's death or removal, thus creating the potential for conflict. That said, it should be stressed that throughout Korean history, the centralization of power has been the norm, including in times of turmoil, and decentralization has been extremely rare.

Scenario 4a: Warlordism

Kim Chong-il, like Kim Il-sung before him, has instituted a policy of divide and rule to control the KPA. This has ensured that serious opposition within the military has been muted since the 1960s. While some alleged coup attempts took place in the early and mid 1990s, there are no obvious powerful individuals with patronage systems completely separate from the Kim family.⁸⁵

While the evidence of existing warlords within the North Korean system is speculative at best, the possibility for their creation is real. Most likely, they would emerge within Kim Chong-il's inner core of supporters. As Kim Chong-il has isolated his power by narrowing the channels of communication and transferring lines of authority between

⁸³ Over the last two years, many Pyongyang watchers have struggled to understand North Korea's constant ratcheting up of its rhetoric and activities. Not only has it conducted missile and nuclear tests, but it has come to the verge of withdrawing from the 1953 armistice and threatening to pull out of the UN. Clashes along the West Sea border are a distinct possibility. While many assume that North Korea's belligerence is a brinkmanship tactic, this type of activity could indicate what might be seen in the days and weeks after the fall of the regime as various factions struggle for control.

⁸⁴ For an examination of such a scenario, see Jonathan D. Pollack and Chung Min Lee, *Preparing for Korean Unification*. (Santa Monica: The Arroyo Center, RAND, 1999).

⁸⁵ Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Leadership*, op. cit.

bureaucracies, he not only has caused deep fractures within the leadership, but also has brought the security forces into conflict with each other. The struggle for resources has exacerbated these fractures and led to numerous turf battles. But they probably will not emerge into full-blown power centers unless there is a serious power vacuum within the leadership.

Scenario 4b: Coup D'état

A traditional coup d'état is not likely to take place upon Kim Chong-il's death since a succession plan appears to be in place.⁸⁶ While individuals or very small groups could become involved in anti-regime activity, there appears to be little possibility that they could rise to the level of command leadership or gain enough power within the military to act as an anti-regime force. Furthermore, the North Korean command and control system requires the cooperation of several officers to deploy military units, thus suggesting a rather large group of conspirators. Such a group would likely be uncovered through the regime's security monitoring system (the General Political Bureau, Military Security Command, and KWP Organization Guidance Department). If, however, the succession were to go awry and a crisis in leadership were to come about, it is possible that elements of the KPA or Praetorian Guard could move to fill a vacuum in power.⁸⁷

If the succession should begin to unravel, two corps-level entities to watch would be the Pyongyang Defense Command and the Third Corps. Both are responsible for security and defense of the capital. Each is commanded by a colonel general, but very little is known about either. Presumably, they have close ties to the senior military leadership and probably were hand selected by Kim Chong-il. They probably have served in other corps commands and may have spent time in the General Staff apparatus. Given the fact that Chang Song-u, Chang Song-taek's older brother, was a former commander of the Third Corps and later (before his death) oversaw the Civil Defense Command, it is possible that these commanders have ties to his patronage network.

At present, the Third Corps reports up the chain of command to the General Staff Department, and ultimately to its chief, Ri Yong-ho, a former commander of the

⁸⁶ Some Pyongyang watchers have speculated about the possibility of a military coup. See Jasper Becker, *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸⁷ It is important to note that if a coup were to occur, the profile of the conspirators would be critical to how it unfolded. If it were to occur among the senior leadership, there would be potential for the regime to reach out to the international community. If, however, it came from inside the middle ranks of the military, the likely outcome would be a severe crack-down.

Pyongyang Defense Command. Command and control of the Pyongyang Defense Command, however, is unclear; some say that it reports to the General Staff, while others contend that it reports directly to Kim Chong-il. According to one source, command and control in times of crisis passes to O Kuk-yol, who has ultimate responsibility for the defense of Pyongyang.⁸⁸

In the case of a coup d'état, the system would be even more fragile because the incoming leadership would have little experience in running the regime. At most, they could impose martial law. At this point, they might choose to back a group of leaders or a strongman (most likely within the CMC and NDC). The government probably could not continue to function under these circumstances.

Characteristics and indicators of scenario 4

In a scenario where warlords have divided the spoils of the regime in the aftermath of Kim Chong-il's death or ouster, the situation would be highly volatile and unpredictable.⁸⁹ In the wake of a coup, it is possible that no one faction could grasp exclusive power because of the current system of multiple checks between the powerful institutions. As a result, centralized command and control would be weak at best and maybe even non-existent. Very likely, pockets of control would exist throughout the country, arranged along geographical and, possibly, existing military lines. Because Kim has taken measures to restrict horizontal loyalties throughout the military, even corps and divisions might break down into smaller components beholden to certain individuals (warlords). Some of these warlords might have existing ties to the outside world because of past illicit ventures. Others might have ties to surrounding countries forged along military-to-military and covert intelligence ties.

In such a situation, economic and political life inside North Korea would likely grind to a halt, as the regime would be unable to make decisions regarding the day-to-day operations of the country. Despite the parceling out of the collapsed state into warlord fiefdoms, disorder and anarchic entrepreneurial behavior would likely exist. The population movement and economic deprivation outlined in scenario 3, could be seen in this scenario, as well.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with senior North Korean defector, June 2009.

⁸⁹ Such a scenario does not depend on Kim Chong-il's death or removal. Another potential catalyst could be provincial resistance to Pyongyang's efforts to extract goods and resources. Provincial leaders and local military commanders could collude to ignore central authority and establish autonomous enclaves within the country.

Probably the most daunting aspect of this scenario is the potential for conflict to break out inside North Korea. Warlords with access to military hardware would have a strong incentive to protect the areas under their control, as well as to expand their access to food and natural resources. The collapse of the economic infrastructure, the emergence of trans-provincial and trans-national markets, and hoarding could lead to battles over dwindling resources. If this struggle were to get out of control, it could lead to a collapse of the regime or, worse, a civil war.

Indicators of an impending crisis in scenario 4

In scenario 4, the following political, socio-economic, and military and security indicators would point to a crisis:

Political indicators:

- Defections of senior leaders to China and South Korea
- Elite complaints about reduction in benefits and access to hard currency
- Reports of imprisonment and execution of Kim family members
- Widespread executions of former officials
- Movement of officials and their families out of Pyongyang
- Increase in official corruption
- Possible attempts by North Korean diplomats to reach out to neighboring countries
- Attempts by sub-state actors to reach out to neighboring countries

Socio-economic indicators:

- Steady increase in refugee flow toward the borders
- Reports of rebellions
- Reports of protests in urban centers
- Increases in crime and violence until warlords exert control
- Attempts to restrict internal travel

- Sub-state actors setting up regional markets

Military and security indicators:

- Initial attempts to seal the borders
- Increased frequency of radio communication between military forces
- Reports of conflicts between military units or within the security apparatus
- Widespread turnover within the security apparatus
- Reports of purges within military units, especially at the senior level, as field-grade officers exert control
- Unusual movement of Praetorian Guard units
- Unforeseen shake-up of corps- and division-level commanders, especially if some form of central government survives
- Sub-state actors setting up a regional security apparatus
- Collaboration between regional party/government leaders and corps commanders to ensure order along provincial lines

Managing a crisis in scenario 4

One of the major challenges for policymakers in this scenario would be monitoring developments as they unfolded inside North Korea. Discerning the intentions of North Korea would be extremely difficult, and the potential for mistakes would be high. In addition, U.S. and South Korean forces have spent decades looking for indicators of a North Korean attack across the DMZ. Such indicators might mirror some of those outlined above, thus creating the potential for North Korea's neighbors to be drawn into the conflict.⁹⁰ Even if mistaken indicators did not factor into regional calculations, policymakers would still have to weigh the option of whether to intervene to prevent the situation from deteriorating further and, possibly, to secure stockpiles of nuclear weapons. If North Korea's neighbors chose to intervene, they could face insurgent activity.

⁹⁰ Discussions with Chinese North Korea watchers, May 2011.

Short of intervention, North Korea's neighbors might explore ways to keep the situation contained inside North Korea's borders. These could include reaching out to factions (provided they could be identified) deemed capable of limiting spillover of refugees or violent actions on their respective borders. This support, however, would have to be coordinated in order to prevent the rise of even more powerful factions, potentially making the situation less stable. If security could be secured, diplomatic openings might emerge to allow for the international community to broker a power-sharing agreement among North Korean factions, thus laying the groundwork to establish a viable and (with considerable outside assistance) stable government.

Conclusion

Can North Korea remain viable? Can major internal change take place without engendering internal conflict and acute risks to the regime? Does the North's apparent stability mask an internal brittleness and vulnerability that could pose a direct challenge to the system's survival? Such questions furnish the subtext to virtually all discussions about the long-term (and even near-term) future of the Hermit Kingdom.

To many observers, North Korea's continued existence is defying the laws of economic and political gravity. Repeated challenges to the viability of the regime—the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the loss of large-scale Soviet and (to a lesser degree) Chinese subsidies, the death of Kim Il-sung, and severe economic contraction for close to a decade—has convinced many observers that the North is living on borrowed time. In 2011, nearly two decades after many first predicted the collapse, North Korea remains intact with no clear end in sight.

That, however, does not mean that the North Korean regime is necessarily stable. In fact, it is undergoing severe stress. This paper argues that the most likely reason for this stress to manifest itself in instability would be an upheaval within the central leadership, such as Kim Chong-il's death or removal from power. Kim's extreme concentration of power is simultaneously the North Korean political system's major strength and its primary vulnerability. Once this lynchpin is removed, the likelihood of crisis within the system will be significant.

This paper has discussed several possible crises that would require neighboring countries to take emergency management measures. No management strategy is a silver bullet that can magically solve all of the problems inherent to a collapsed or failing state. Still, North Korea's neighbors must try to monitor the situation, coordinate a response, and have plans and supplies in place to deal with the fall-out.⁹¹ Unless these steps are taken, the situation could quickly evolve to a point where a humanitarian crisis would overwhelm

⁹¹ During the unfolding crisis, neighboring countries would probably watch each other's actions closely, as opposed to taking independent actions. They also would likely restrict their activities to the area near their own territory, in order to prevent miscalculation.

the capacity of foreign donors, and regional powers would be forced to unilaterally intervene in order to protect their interests or gain a strategic advantage.

