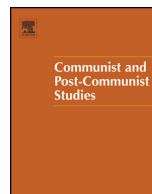




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Kim Jong-il's military-first politics and beyond: Military control mechanisms and the problem of power succession



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ABSTRACT

Military-first politics has been at the heart of the unexpected regime stability in North Korea under Kim Jong-il and his son Jong-un. This article analyzes Kim Jong-il's military-first politics as a strategic choice for regime survival, in which the locus of political power switched from the party to the military. At the same time, Kim Jong-il formulated a complex system of circumventing the possibility of the armed forces' political domination, including personalistic control using sticks and carrots, fortifying security and surveillance institutions, and compartmentalizing the security institutions for intra- and inter-organizational checks and balances to prevent the emergence of organized opposition to the regime. Although an effective short-term solution, military-first politics could never be a long-term strategy for building *gangseongdaeguk* (a powerful and prosperous nation). The current Kim Jong-un regime needs to conduct sweeping reforms to address dire economic difficulties, which might result in a departure from his father's legacy and downgrade the military's power. In this process, the current regime's (in)stability will depend on how it maintains a balance between revoking military-first politics and preserving the armed forces' allegiance.

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1. Introduction

To date, the power succession from Kim Jong-il to his son Jong-un has appeared to be stable with no sign of imminent regime crisis—at least on the surface. Kim Jong-un has taken over political leadership in the military, the party, and the cabinet, exercising control over domestic, foreign, and military affairs. Since Kim Jong-il died on December 17, 2011, his son's succession has been sweeping and peremptory: Kim Jong-un became supreme commander of the Korean People's Army (KPA) on December 30, 2011, was appointed as the first secretary of the Korean Workers Party (KWP) on April 11, 2012, and two days later was designated as the chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC). He consolidated his grip on the political leadership in Pyongyang when he rose to the rank of marshal of the KPA (Jung, 2012).

The unexpected stability in North Korea makes many—including scholars and policy-makers—wonder how the dictatorial regime has managed to survive multifarious challenges from both domestic and international arenas. Since the 1990s, many observers speculated that the post-Kim Il-sung North Korea would not survive such challenges; today, Kim Jong-il's death has spawned the same speculation that the Kim Jong-un regime may soon collapse (Bennett and Lind, 2011; Byman and Lind, 2010; Snyder, 2010; Stares and Wit, 2009; Oh and Hassig, 1999). Such speculation is not without intuitive insight as most dictatorial regimes do not have a clearly established rule of succession. Furthermore, considering that the new leader in Pyongyang does not have a prominent political career or rightful entitlement to rule (except that he was anointed by his father), the country is likely to become embroiled in such a power struggle after the dictator dies or is dethroned.

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The key for understanding North Korea's current politics of regime survival is Kim Jong-il's military-first politics, in which a significant power shift from the party to the military occurred; equally important are the ways in which Kim managed to control top brass in the KPA. Considering that an organized anti-regime movement from below is a distant possibility in North Korea, the armed forces—if so willing—might be the only institution with the physical ability to overthrow the dictator. Under Kim Jong-il, the KPA became a highly politicized institution; it was no longer limited to the mission of national defense, but also assumed non-military-related missions, such as acting as guardian of the regime. Due to the KPA's power and political roles, the Kim regime desperately needed both “protection by the military” and “protection from the military” (Feaver, 1996, p. 154). In other words, Kim Jong-il wanted a strong military that could guarantee both the state and the regime security, but he was simultaneously pressured to design a system to control the KPA. Kim Jong-il's legacy of military-first politics still governs North Korea and, thus, this study will furnish a better understanding of the present and future of the Pyongyang regime's political (in)stability and policy directions.

Broadly speaking, previous studies of Kim Jong-il's military-first politics have revolved around three venues. The first is an analysis of the ideological characteristics of military-first politics in relation to Kim Il-sung's ideology of *Juche* (self-reliance). Scholars focus on the ideological narratives that the slogan aims to achieve—namely, controlling the people and building *gangseongdaeguk* (a powerful and prosperous nation)—and whether the discourse is a continuation of *Juche* or a completely different brand of propaganda (Jeon, 2009; Byman and Lind, 2010). Second, some examine structural and institutional transformation of the Pyongyang regime, especially the interactive—and sometimes conflicting—relationship among the party, the cabinet, and the military. Some analyses suggest that Kim Jong-il's launch of military-first politics brought significant changes to the power structure in which the military rose to become a dominant decision-maker at the expense of the party's power and prestige (Kim, 2006; Kim, 2006; McEachern, 2010); others contend that the political system is still intact as the KWP remains the political organ with the highest authority and the KPA is under the party's guidance and control (Lee, 2003). The institutional approach also analyzes Kim's political maneuvering to control the military (Jeon, 2000; Scobell, 2006; Gause, 2006). Finally, scholars have explored the domestic and foreign policy effects of Kim Jong-il's military-first politics (Suh, 2002; McEachern, 2009; Kim, 2010).

This article adopts an institutional perspective to examine major shifts in the political power structure and the military control mechanisms Kim Jong-il exercised, which will provide insight into post-Kim Jong-il's North Korean politics. This article suggests that military-first politics was adopted as a strategic choice to overcome serious threats to the survival of the state and the regime. The Kim regime demoted the KWP's power and prestige to overcome the party's sheer incompetence in dealing with challenges the country faced at the turn of the 1990s and potential challenges from senior party elites to Kim's political authority. The consequence was a power shift from the KWP to the KPA. At the same time, Kim made every effort to prevent the KPA from threatening his position by devising a complex and sophisticated web of personal loyalties and institutional checks and balances. As a result, although the KPA emerged as the most powerful governing organ under military-first politics, Kim Jong-il was able to control the armed forces so that a coup became a distant possibility.

This article is structured along the following themes. It first discusses international and domestic contexts in which Kim Jong-il embarked on military-first politics and the strategic aims he hankered to achieve. Second, it outlines major changes in the political power structure in Pyongyang: the dwindling influence of the KWP and the growing power of the KPA. Third, the article details Kim Jong-il's military control mechanisms—both personal and institutional designs—to preclude the military's threat to his leadership. The article concludes with speculation on political inheritances—both benefits and burdens—that have been passed to the Kim Jong-un regime.

2. Military-first politics: structural contexts and strategic choices

2.1. Challenges to the party-state

The defining characteristic of North Korea under Kim Jong-il was *seongun jeohgchi* (military-first politics), in which the ultimate aim was to build a *gangseongdaeguk* (a powerful and prosperous nation). These catchwords signified security and economic problems that threatened the survival of the regime. Kim Jong-il's military-first politics can be understood in the context of the international structural changes that occurred at the end of the Cold War and the accompanying domestic problems. Dire challenges to the regime came from three quarters: the collapse of the regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, natural disasters and famine, and Kim Il-sung's death.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, North Korea lost its biggest security and economic benefactor. Until the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union, as North Korea's largest trade partner, furnished the country with one-sided trade that amounted to \$3.5 billion per year (McEachern, 2010, p. 67). However, this amount plummeted at the turn of the 1990s when both the Soviet Union and China demanded that North Korea use hard currency for trade. In the famine that struck North Korea, approximately five percent of the population perished. Although frequent droughts and floods in the 1990s hit the country's already fragile economy and resulted in famine, North Korea already had much more serious structural ills that came from the state-controlled socialist model of economy and the loss of opportunities for reform (Haggard and Noland, 2009, p. 4). The economic hardship threatened the Pyongyang regime when the state could not continue to provide food and other necessities to its people (probably the only rationale for dictatorial rule). As a result, massive defections occurred.

The worst disaster came when Kim Il-sung died in 1994, creating a power vacuum. Despite being a brutal dictator who purged numerous potential rivals and political opponents, Kim Il-sung enjoyed the “unquestionable acceptance of authority”

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