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

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in the in the composition of the North Korean elite from 1997 to 2012, a particularly tumultuous period in the history of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Specifically, the paper assesses the changing composition of the leadership networks around both Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, using data from the entourages that accompanied the great leaders on their "on the spot guidance" inspection tours. The paper finds that there have been significant changes in the leadership elite since the succession of Kim Jong Un. The paper offers some observations regarding the implications these changes have on the receptivity of the regime to a normalization of relations with the West and future economic and political reform.

North Korea, given its highly secretive nature, has been very difficult for political science scholars to study systematically. Indeed, much of the scholarly inquiry has either been based on anecdotal and impressionistic "readings of the tea leaves" or broad "strategic" predictions on the future of the regime (often without empirical support). More recently, a newer generation of scholarship has examined North Korean politics more systematically (Eberstadt, 2007; Haggard and Noland, 2007; Noland, 2004) with most of these focused on the state of the North Korean economy, or its nuclear program, or on public opinion using expatriate populations of North Koreans in Manchuria (Noland and Haggard, 2011).

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

This paper examines empirically the change in the composition of the North Korean elite from 1997 to 2012, a particularly tumultuous period in the history of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The period began with process of the consolidation of power for Kim Jong Il after his official emergence as the new *Suryong*, or undisputed leader. This followed by the economic collapse of the country and great famine of the late 1990s. Further, the period includes: efforts at economic reform after 2002, a nuclear crisis beginning in 2006, and the illness and selection and ascendency of Kim Jong Un as successor to his father, the "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il.

The first part of the paper introduces the conceptual and theoretical framework, beginning with the issue of whether there is a "reformist" versus "hardliner" cleavage within the North Korean elite and a discussion of the basic leader-centric nature of the North Korean state. Second, I assess the changing composition of the networks around both Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. Finally I offer some observations regarding the implications these changes have on the receptivity of the regime to a normalization of relations with the West and future economic and political reforms.

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1. Conceptual and theoretical framework

1.1. "Reformists" vs. "hardliners" in North Korea?

Are there policy cleavages within the North Korean political elite? Generally, the extant literature on the metamorphosis of the elite from 1997 to 2012 has tended to involve a debate over whether or not there are "true" reformers in the regime (McEachern, 2010, 2008; Lee, 2007; Carlin and Witt, 2006; Kim, 2006; Kwon and Ford, 2005; Chung, 2004; Gause, 2004; Lim, 2002) or whether the reforms of the early 2000s largely occurred *despite* the regime, rather than because of intentional reforms (Haggard and Noland, 2007).

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

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

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

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

Has the composition of the political elite changed from 1997 to 2012? Given that Kim Jong Il's decision making was often absolutist (and this tradition of leadership has certainly carried over to his son), but also involved input from different sources —albeit a very limited group in his inner circle —before making a decision, this balance of perspectives within the group closest to him provides insight into his, and his successor's, policy preferences (Kim, 2006: 102). Although Klingner (2010) may be quite right, that these policy pronouncements are a fraud, and merely represent a "good cop/bad cop" strategy on the part of the regime, if the inner circle appears to be populated by "good cops" this may at least reflect the regime's willingness to entertain a more pragmatic approach to economic change (at least a tolerance for markets) and some form of rapprochement with South Korea and the United States. Further, importantly, it would also be possible (having such a baseline) to compare current developments under Kim Jong Un to detect if there have been substantial changes in the network since the death of Kim Jong Il.

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

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

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

How does one assess who is part of the network of close associates of the leader? Although official positions and functions may provide some clues as to which elites have access to Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, real access can be ascertained by observing the individuals who frequently accompany them on their inspection tours (Gause, 2004; Lim, 2002). Other studies have examined these inspection tours. In a study conducted by Noland and Haggard (2011), Kim Jong Il's "on-the-spot-