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

Jongseok Woo

Department of Government & International Affairs, University of South Florida, 4202 East Fowler Ave., SOC107, Tampa, FL 33620-8100, United States

Article history:
Available online 27 April 2014

Keywords:
North Korea
Kim Jong-il
Military-first politics
Korean People’s Army

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.
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 hankerred 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"
as the “beloved leader” from ordinary North Koreans for more than four decades (Kim, 2006, p. 93). The late Kim legitimized his rule through the glorification and mystification of his leadership in anti-Japanese guerrilla warfare in the 1930s and 1940s and through self-deification; he indoctrinated his people with the “Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Juche Idea,” which required absolute loyalty to the revolutionary party and, specifically, to the leader. Kim Il-sung was revered by North Koreans as the founder of the nation and of the Juche ideology. When he died, there was a loyalty vacuum that could not be filled, as no one could compare to the “dear leader.”

Faced with multifarious challenges to the regime’s survival, the KWP as the highest political organ of the state proved incompetent; the party itself was plagued with bureaucratic indolence, arrogance, and rampant corruption. With the collapse of the former communist regimes, communism as a utopian political ideology lost its charm. The KWP as the vanguard of Kim Il-sung’s Juche ideology failed to win popular loyalty; instead, the party organ continued to rely on the suppression of information and communication as outside information streamed into its people. There was a growing discrepancy between the party’s propaganda for a utopian society and popular disenchantment. The KWP’s inability to govern became evident as the economy continued to deteriorate into the mid-1990s and the party’s control over its people slackened during the gonaneui haenggun (arduous march). Kim Jong-il certainly realized that the party was unable to offer remedies to the country’s troubles; the mere attempt to revamp party organizations or reshuffle senior leadership positions would not solve the problems.

Another reason for Kim Jong-il’s relegation of the party and reliance on the KPA stemmed from his own conviction that the communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe collapsed not because of their economic difficulties, but because of their “failure to establish and maintain a firm ideology to manage their societies” (Jeon, 2009, p. 183). Kim Jong-il emphasized that “socialist countries have collapsed, with no shots fired, because they did not have strong troops. There will be no people, no socialist country, and no communist party if they do not have a strong army at a time when they are constructing a socialist society under siege and threat of imperialists” (Kim, 1999, p. 267). Certainly, Kim Jong-il’s military-first politics derived from the lessons on regime survival learned from the experience of the former communist regimes.

Still, a more deep-seated reason for Kim Jong-il’s decision to demote the KWP and align with the KPA was that he lacked his father’s leadership qualities and charisma. Kim Jong-il did not possess his father’s credentials as a revolutionary. He never fought a guerrilla war for independence, did not invent a governing ideology, and was not even a good speaker. One of Kim Jong-il’s most cherished political priorities was to enforce party discipline through the Organization and Guidance Department of the KWP, “the party within the party” that was responsible for the appointment of high-ranking party cadres, ideological instruction, and inspection of other state apparatuses (Jeon, 2009, p. 89). Kim Jong-il’s efforts to enforce discipline and competence in the party only met with declining efficiency of the pivotal political organ by the end of the 1980s. In sum, Kim Jong-il’s military-first politics emerged in the contexts of internal and external problems that the KWP proved incapable of solving.

2.2. Power shift from the party to the military

The ascendancy of the KPA under military-first politics was a clear deviation from the orthodox Leninist party system found in traditional totalitarian regimes. In a communist regime, the party as the vanguard of the proletariat commands the highest authority; the party envisions the state ideology, controls the lives of government officials and ordinary citizens, and formulates government policy. Supposedly, the party will maintain unity through its leadership of the Politburo that is elected by the Central Committee, which in turn is elected by the Party Congress, while local party cells elect Party Congress members (Scobell, 2006, p. 18). Ideally, the party administers the organs that represent the proletariat and fulfill the revolutionary mission. In North Korea, the party’s authority is identified with suryong (dear leader), that merely carries out suryong’s instructions.

Kim Jong-il’s military-first politics clearly shifted the locus of power and authority from the party to the military, such that North Korea’s political system was no longer a party-state. The question is how much of a power shift occurred under Kim Jong-il. Some suggest that the North Korean political system is still intact as the party remains the highest political authority that enforces the dear leader’s will. The 1998 constitution, which codified the military’s vital role in the country, stipulates that all state activities must be conducted under the leadership of the KWP; this was reaffirmed in the 2010 constitution. The KWP—with approximately three million members—still exerts enormous influence over elites and citizens: “With the regime’s demise, they would lose their power [and] privilege, and hence be unable to provide for their families” (Scobell, 2006, p. 22). In civil-military relations, the military was still the party’s army and effectively controlled by the party through its instruments, such as the Politburo and the Military Committee, the infiltration of party organizations in the military, and political commissars’ indoctrination of army officers. As a result, the KPA did not supersede the political authority of the KWP; the military was politicized simply to enforce the party’s will. According to this view, military-first politics was nothing new to the system because it did not replace the party-state structure, but rather strengthened the system through military means (Lee, 2003, p. 89).

An opposing interpretation of military-first politics suggests that Kim Jong-il transformed the country from a party-state to a military-dominant regime. According to this view, military-first politics switched the locus of power from the party to the military so that the latter directed the former: “[T]he military is so powerful that it is above the state. The military has now become the supreme commander of the state, the party, and society, turning North Korea into a military garrison state” (Kim, 2006, p. 65). Military-first politics resulted in the institutional autonomy of the military from the party and the “institutional
differentiation” between the two so that the former was not only the vanguard of state apparatuses, but also provided the nation’s spirit and morale (Kim, 2006, p. 81). This view suggests that Kim Jong-il’s political status, and especially his control over the military, were tenuous at best; therefore, he had to elevate the power and prestige of the KPA as a means of controlling it and consolidating his leadership.

Apparently, neither of the views fully reflects the nature of military-first politics under Kim Jong-il. The first interpretation does not explain the major changes that have occurred in North Korean politics since the mid-1990s. The constitutional or institutional design of the party’s supremacy over other state apparatuses may not accurately reflect the ways in which political power is exercised. This point is crucially relevant to North Korea as Kim Jong-il’s personal predilections in ruling could easily bypass the constitutional design. At the same time, the opposite interpretation of military-first politics also deforms the reality of North Korean politics in that, at the time of his father’s death, Kim Jong-il was already firmly controlling the KPA. The power succession to Kim Jong-il was formalized at the Sixth Congress of the KWP in October 1980. In May 1990, he was elected first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and, in December 1991, to the post of Supreme Commander of the KPA. In 1992, he rose to the rank of marshal of the KPA; in April 1993, he was elected chairman of the National Defense Commission. Consequently, when Kim Il-sung died, there was virtually no possibility of power struggle as Kim Jong-il was the apparent successor and firmly controlled all governmental organs.

Therefore, rather than over-(or under)estimate the political consequence of military-first politics, it is more worthwhile to focus on the political objectives that Kim Jong-il tried to achieve and, in this context, the KPA’s power and role in North Korean politics. At the expense of the KWP’s power and prestige, Kim Jong-il mobilized the KPA beyond its traditional role of national defense and expanded into the social, economic, and political areas. However, the expansion of the military’s role did not translate into building the KPA’s political power to the point that officers acquired the ability to veto important decisions. Kim Jong-il’s primary objective with military-first politics was to safeguard his political leadership in the face of domestic and foreign security challenges. As a result, Kim’s control over the military was tight as the military’s subordination to its master became ever more resolute.

2.3. KPA’s political roles under Kim Jong-il

The KPA’s role expansion into non-military areas under military-first politics was not a new phenomenon; high-ranking officers had also been party elites. The expansion of the military’s role is traceable to the 1960s, when Kim Il-sung launched the 4-dae gunsanoseon (four-fold military line) that comprised “(1) arming the entire nation, (2) training all KPA soldiers to assume higher responsibilities than their rank and position would dictate, (3) turning the entire country into a fortress, and (4) modernizing the KPA” (Koh, 2005). From the early years of state-building, the KPA’s roles were extensive in the political systems (especially in the party and the cabinet), economic development, and mobilization of the civilian population for political indoctrination and military training.

However, the 1960s were also when the KWP institutionalized its control over the KPA. After eliminating different factions (especially the Soviet Koreans and the Yanan faction), the KWP installed the party committee at all levels of the KPA in 1958 so that political officers shared commandship with commanding officers to maintain the party’s supervision over the officer corps. Furthermore, the party also instituted the Military Committee in the KWP’s Central Committee. The Rules of the Korean Workers’ Party, revised in each of the Fourth (1961) through Sixth (1980) Congresses, stipulated that the KWP Central Committee reserved the right to organize the revolutionary forces (Article 23) and to lead the country’s military forces and defense industries (Article 27). The 1980 version of the Rules of the KWP dedicated all of Chapter Seven to explaining the party’s control over the KPA. Likewise, the party rules made it impossible for top brass to be outside the control of or to supersede the authority of the party (Korean Worker’s Party, 1981). The party’s control over the military was consolidated in 1959 under the political commissar system, in which political commissars were employed at the corps through regiment levels and political guiding officers at the lower military units. These commissars were recruited from high-ranking party cadres and shared leadership with military commanders by cosigning on all military decisions (Lee, 2003, p. 155–168). After Kim Jong-il was officially introduced as the successor to his father at the Sixth Party Congress in 1980, he strengthened the party’s control over the KPA by reinforcing the party’s ideological discipline in the military through his leadership of the Organization and Guidance Department of the KWP. Until Kim Il-Sung’s death, the party and the military were interwoven as high-ranking officers were party elites and party members also penetrated the military through the political commissar system, which in turn reinforced the KWP’s control over the KPA.

Such party–army relations drastically changed after Kim Jong-il assumed political leadership and launched military-first politics in the 1990s. Although the KPA had been the party’s army, military-first politics separated the two institutions, and the KPA was now the people’s army and the guardian of the Kim Jong-il regime. The institutional separation freed the KPA from the KWP’s supervision and made the military not only the defender of the nation, but also the ideological vanguard that sustained the nation’s highest spirit and morale. Although military-first politics officially launched in 1997, Kim Jong-il’s desire to mobilize the KPA forces for non-security-related purposes emerged earlier in the decade. In 1991, Kim insisted that the country “needs to value the military … the state will collapse if it does not honor the military … the party organs should put priority on taking care of the problems in military-related industries” (Kim, 1999, p. 24). He reiterated the military’s role a year later: “[T]he party can be protected and prosper only when there is a strong military. Accomplishing the Juche revolutionary mission first and foremost requires the strengthening of the military” (Kim, 1999, p. 6–7). Military-first politics became state ideology in March 1997, when Kim Jong-il delivered his speech at the KWP Central Committee, declaring that
the KPA was “the main driving force of revolution and the pillar of the country” and that the people should firmly grasp the military's revolutionary fervor (Jeon, 2009, p. 190).

Kim Jong-il’s employment of military-first politics put the KPA at the forefront of his power, which elevated the military's prestige and political influence vis-à-vis the party. At the institutional level, military-first politics separated the military from the party and resulted in the latter’s loss of control over the former. The KPA's institutional autonomy enabled Kim Jong-il not only to use the military in times of national crisis, but also to safeguard his political power by ruling the party and the military separately. The power shift from the party to the army was manifested in the 1998 constitutional revision, which removed two state apparatuses—the state’s president and vice president and the Central People’s Committee—and elevated the National Defense Commission to the highest state institution to orchestrate national security and economic policies (Mansourov, 2006, p. 45).

Military-first policies were also apparent in several governing schemes, including Kim’s focus on frequent visits to military bases and military industries for his “guidance inspection” activities, massive increases in defense spending at a time of economic distress, and empowerment of the National Defense Commission. In 1994, Kim Jong-il made only one military-related trip out of 21 guidance visits. However, between 1995 and 2006, more than 50 percent of these guidance inspections were related to the military and defense-related facilities, although the number slightly decreased after his stroke and ensuing serious health problems in 2007 (Jung, 2011, p. 127). Kim’s reliance on the military was plainly expressed in his 1996 address at the 50th anniversary of the Kim Il-sung University, when he insisted that he “frequently perform[ed] guidance inspections on the military, so in today’s complex political situation, it is of the utmost importance to strengthen the armed forces.” (Jung, 2011, p. 129).

The growing political influence of the top brass in the armed forces was reflected in the top echelons of the government that accompanied Kim Jong-il’s guidance inspections. Key escorts for the guidance tours most often included Oh Jin-u, marshal and minister of the KPA (died in 1995), Choe Gwang, marshal and chief of general staff (died in 1997), Jo Moung-rok, vice marshal, first vice chairman of the NDC (died in 2010), and Kim Yong-chun, vice marshal and vice chairman of the NDC, among the older echelons of the KPA; as well as Kim Il-choel, vice marshal, minister of the KPA, Yi Myong-su, director of the General Staff’s Operations Bureau, and Pak Jae-kyong, deputy director of General Political Bureau, among the relatively new class of the KPA leadership (Gause, 2006, p. 7–11). In contrast, party officials’ influence in the Kim Jong-il regime became marginalized, as several were removed from their posts or retired their seats passed to KPA officers.

The growing influence of the KPA under Kim Jong-il was also reflected in the country’s defense spending. North Korea’s official defense budget revealed a modest increase during the Kim Jong-il era, accounting for 11.4 percent of all government spending in 1994 and 14.6 percent in 1998 when Kim Jong-il formally embraced military-first politics. However, the numbers drastically change when one looks at other sources. For example, the Ministry of National Defense in South Korea estimates defense spending in North Korea to be above 50 percent throughout Kim Jong-il’s rule (Moon and Lee, 2009, p. 88). Despite the wide variations in the sources, Kim Jong-il clearly gave the KPA priority in allocating scant domestic resources during and after the arduous march period.

Another noticeable change in military-first politics was the strengthening of the National Defense Commission. The NDC was not identical to the KPA; it included a small number of senior leaders under Kim Jong-il. The NDC was first mentioned in the 1972 constitution and was one of several sub-committees of the Central People’s Committee. The president was concurrently chairman of the NDC, which indicated that the power of the NDC chair was meaningless without him. The NDC became independent in 1990, when Kim Jong-il was appointed as vice chairman (Lee, 2003, p. 186). Such change was reflected in the 1992 constitution, which declared that the chairman of the NDC would be the second most powerful leader in North Korea, after Juseok (the president). Meanwhile, the 1998 constitution permanently removed the Juseok system, vacating the presidency forever and naming Kim Il-sung as the “eternal president.” Kim Jong-il was elected chairman of the NDC in 1992 and reelected in 1998 with the new constitution. Although the 1992 constitution allocated the NDC chair’s power only over the military, the 1998 constitution extended the chair’s power over all armed forces and defense-related matters. The Rodong newspaper (1998) succinctly delineated the NDC chair’s power when it stated that the chair of the NDC “is the supreme leader of the nation who reins the nation’s entire political, military, and economic affairs and defends the socialist state and its people.” The new constitution stated that

the Chairman of the National Defense Commission ... is the supreme leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea ... directs affairs of the State, personally guides the work of the National Defense Commission, appoints or removes key cadres in the field of national defense ... and declares a state of emergency, a state of war and mobilization order within the country (Information Center on North Korea, 2010).

Kim Jong-il mobilized the armed forces to survive the multifaceted challenges to his regime and consolidate his political power by counterbalancing the power of the party. In this process, the military emerged as the most influential governing body in North Korea. The puzzle is, if the KPA rose to prominence at the expense of the once preeminent KWP in post–Kim Il-sung’s North Korea, how did influence did the military become during and after the Kim Jong-il regime? Has the KPA risen to become a political organ powerful enough to surpass other institutions and regulate the country’s policy agendas, especially economic reform and foreign policy? Contrary to the widespread perception that the KPA essentially controlled Pyongyang’s policy directions, this article suggests that the armed forces’ political power was still limited. This point becomes evident when one consciously draws the distinction between the expansion of the military’s role into different non-security areas and its actual exercise of political power. As previously discussed, the KPA’s expansion into socio-economic spheres was already
prevalent in the 1960s, but the role expansion was accompanied with strict guidance and oversight by the party apparatuses. The same could be said of the KPA’s expansion under military-first politics but, this time, not by the party machine but by Kim Jong-il’s personal military control schemes. To gauge the armed forces’ political influence in North Korea accurately, one needs to examine the sophisticated military control mechanisms that Kim Jong-il employed.

3. Kim Jong-il’s military control mechanisms

Kim Jong-il consolidated his power by separating the military from the party and elevating the power and prestige of the former while demoting the latter. At the same time, Kim’s political priority was to secure tight control over top brass in the army. This time, however, instead of using the party machine, Kim Jong-il asserted personalistic control over the military by fabricating a complex system of military control instruments, which can be grouped into three maneuvers: (1) controlling the top echelons of the army by granting “carrots” to devotees and using “sticks” on dissenters; (2) reinforcing the army units responsible for regime security; and (3) creating a complex system of checks and balances within and among key military units. Ensuring the KPA’s absolute loyalty through personal and institutional cooptation was the key to the survival of Kim Jong-il’s regime.

3.1. Carrots and sticks: personalistic control of the military

More often than not, a dictatorship’s survival is based on political support not from the people but from a small number of key elite groups that support the regime. A dictator will provide goods to members of the inner circle in the form of political power and prestige (but not necessarily powerful), material benefits (such as luxury goods, cozy housing, vacations, and lucrative industries), and commendations (medals and public accolades) (Mesquita et al., 2003). Such favors were crucial to the Pyongyang regime’s survival, in which the people suffered from economic hardships for decades, making the provision of goods to the masses simply unfeasible. Equally important was the ruthlessly efficient suppression of any organized challenge to the dictator’s authority.

Upon his succession, Kim Jong-il consolidated his political power base by fashioning a core stratum of new elites from the military, while making sure not to alienate the aging revolutionaries. Kim’s military-first politics did not immediately isolate or eliminate the aging revolutionaries who had waged the anti-Japanese guerrilla war and later governed North Korea as principal followers of Kim Il-sung; he kept them in their positions until they retired or died. When they died, Kim kept the posts temporarily vacant in their honor. For example, when the venerable Oh Jin-u (one of the core members of the Kim Il-sung regime from the partisan guerrilla era and the second most powerful elite after Kim Il-sung’s death) died in 1995, Kim Jong-il left his post as minister of the KPA vacant for more than seven months until appointing Choe Gwang, general chief of staff of the KPA, to fill it. When Choe died two years later, the position was again left vacant until 1998, when Kim Il-cheol, commander of the Korean People’s Navy, succeeded him. Kim Jong-il did not need to alienate his father’s supporters; they simply occupied honorary posts (Jeon, 2000, p. 766–767).

Such inclusive politics were possible due to Kim Jong-il’s crafty design of a dual-power system in the cabinet and the military, in which the highest-ranking leader kept nominal leadership while a number-two (or number-three) officer usually wielded the real power. Kim Jong-il received reports from, and gave orders directly to, the second- or third-highest officers so that the top brass maintained a system of checks and balances within the hierarchy. Because of this, the official hierarchy and rankings did not accurately reflect power relations in the system; the top leaders who showed up at state ceremonies might not have necessarily been the actual power brokers in North Korea. For example, Kim Yong-nam, chairman of the party’s Standing Committee, and Baek Nam-sun, foreign minister, were the head of state and minister, respectively, but each performed only ritual activities such as delivering ceremonial speeches and accepting foreign diplomats. In contrast, Kang Seok-ju, a lower ranking official as first vice foreign minister, was one of the key inner circle members of the Kim regime and wielded real decision-making power in important foreign policy areas (Kim, 2006, p. 103).

Kim Jong-il safeguarded unwavering allegiance from the top brass in the army with extravagant rewards, including massive promotions and luxury goods. After being elected to the post of supreme commander of the KPA in 1992, Kim Jong-il conferred generous promotions on military officers; about 1200 general grade officers were promoted during the 1990s (Kim, 2009, p. 178). As the first generation of old revolutionary officers died or retired, Kim Jong-il replaced them with generals from his alma mater, the Mankyungdae Revolutionary Institute, or with officers who had studied in Moscow or Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. During the mourning period of 1994–1997, about 50 Kim Il-sung era generals died, and were replaced with handpicked junior officers whose allegiance to him was beyond question. As a result, Kim Jong-il completed the generational changes from his father’s inner circle to his own in both the military and the party.

While conferring material benefits and promotions upon members of his inner circle, Kim Jong-il also resorted to purges and harsh punishments for those whose allegiance was uncertain. As a way to control the people, the Kim Il-sung regime had devised a class system, the songbun (or class), composed of three groups: (1) the “core” class included those who fought the anti-Japanese guerrilla war or war with South Korea and turned into high-ranking KWP cadres, (2) the “wavering” class included the majority, and (3) the “hostile” class included landowners, traditional elites, priests, lawyers, doctors, merchants, and Japanese collaborators. The class system was officially adopted in 1957 by the Politburo of the KWP as a tool for massive purges and tight social control, but continued to classify all North Korean people, although its influence diminished through
the 1990s. Songbun determined “where people lived and worked and even what they ate. Most marriages were also concluded between people of the same or similar songbun” (Lankov, 2012).

Kim Jong-il’s favoritism also shaped his treatment of the people around him. The core selectorectors whom he trusted received foreign luxury goods as generous gifts, including cars, watches, stereos, and televisions—the so-called Kim Jong-il’s grandiose politics. At the same time, he purged about 600 officers after he discovered a coup attempt in 1992. About a dozen army generals who were educated in Moscow and influenced by Gorbachev’s perestroika planned to assassinate the two Kims and implement radical socio-economic reforms in North Korea. However, the plot was discovered and the generals were executed.

Another coup attempt occurred in 1995, this time by the Sixth Army Corps stationed in North Hamkyung province and possibly supported by the neighboring Seventh Army Corps, which planned to march to Pyongyang. However, the plot was also stopped by the Sixth Corps commander, Kim Yong-chun, who was later rewarded with promotion to general staff of the KPA. After this failed coup, Kim Jong-il dissolved the Sixth Corps (McEachern, 2010, p. 88).

Even after the two coup attempts, there were frequent rumors of dissenstion in the military; General Yi Bong-won, deputy head of the KPA’s General Political Bureau, and Suh Gwan-hui, agriculture secretary, were reportedly executed in 1997. One year later, Kim Yong-ryong, deputy head of the State Security Agency, was purged for having made critical remarks about the Kim regime and called for reform (Sano, 2005). As much as Kim Jong-il relied on the military for his political power, his suspicion of the KPA’s allegiance and the possibility of a coup d’état urged him to design personalistic control mechanisms over the top echelons in the party and the army.

3.2. Coup-proofing: security institutions and institutional checks

The KPA’s ascendancy under military-first politics was accompanied by the strengthening of security agencies and army units that were responsible for Kim Jong-il’s regime security. The Pyongyang regime had multiple security agencies that served for regime security, such as the State Security Department (SSD) under the direct control of Kim Jong-il (and the NDC) and the Ministry of People’s Security (MPS) under the cabinet’s control. Furthermore, the Kim Jong-il regime was protected by multiple military units that were in charge of the security of Kim Jong-il himself and the defense of the capital city: the Guard Command under the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces (MPAF), the Pyongyang Defense Command, and the Military Security Command. The presence of multiple all-powerful security institutions is commonplace in any police state that relies on physical and psychological terror to govern, but North Korea under Kim Jong-il was an unusually extreme case, with unusually tight surveillance over its people and the core members of the regime.

The SSD, with approximately 50,000 to 70,000 personnel, is the most powerful secret police agency in North Korea, conducting policing missions from provinces down to imminban (people’s group) and companies with more than 1000 workers. Kim Jong-il directly controlled the SSD when the director position became vacant after director Yi Jin-su died in the 1980s. The SSD’s Special Mission Group, whose 15 members were appointed by Kim Jong-il, directly reported to Kim its responsibilities over “surveillance and ideological investigations of high-ranking officials within the KWP, the SSD, the Cabinet, and Ministry of People’s Armed Forces” (Gause, 2012, p. 25). Another virtually omnipotent security institution is the MPS (previously the Department of Public Security), which is in charge of maintaining law and order, investigating criminal cases and non-political prisoners, and protecting key governmental facilities. However, with more than 200,000 personnel, the MPS’ role extended to surveillance of public officials in the government as well as military officers to verify political allegiance to Kim Jong-il. Of special importance was the Korean People’s Internal Security Force (previously the Korean People’s Security Force) within the MPS, which was in charge of controlling social unrest and rebellion. The third security institution was the Military Security Command (MSC), which was responsible for preventing coup attempts by monitoring and investigating high-ranking army officers for corruption, political crimes, and disloyalty. The MSC, relatively small at about 10,000 personnel, was under the direct control of the NDC and Kim Jong-il through the MPAF.

Standing above all of these security institutions is the National Defense Commission, chaired by Kim Jong-il. In addition to strengthening the NDC’s power and role, Kim Jong-il staffed the institution with military elites who were in charge of the abovementioned security institutions. For example, of 13 NDC members elected after the 12th Supreme People’s Assembly meeting, four were cross-listed with the Commission for Military Affairs of the Central Committee of the KWP: Kim Jong-il, Cho Myong-rok (vice marshal and vice chairman of the NDC), Kim Yong-chun (vice marshal and minister of the KPA), and Kim Il-cheol (vice marshal until 2010). Furthermore, the NDC members included U Dong-chuk (vice director of the State Security Department) and Jang Sung-taek (chief of the Central Administrative Department of the KWP) (Jung, 2011; pp. 350–351).

The NDC’s ability to control the armed forces, security institutions, and entire society was greatly expanded during the final years of Kim Jong-il’s rule. Of particular note was Jang Sung-taek, who was purged in 2004 but subsequently emerged at the top of the power hierarchy. He was elected to the NDC in 2009 and became vice chairman one year later; he was believed to have played vital roles in the transition of power from Kim Jong-il to Jong-un.

Inasmuch as Kim Jong-il empowered the aforementioned security institutions, he astutely invented a system of checks and balances among those security organizations to preclude coup attempts or other challenges to his authority. He compartmentalized the security system so that there would be no possibility of inter-organizational collusion. In general, North Korea’s political systems under Kim Il-sung emphasized inter-departmental coordination for institutional efficiency so that one official often held two or more positions in multiple state agencies. However, Kim Jong-il reorganized the governmental structure in such a way that inter-departmental coordination was difficult, thereby facilitating inter-agency competition
This institutional compartmentalization and inter-agency competition replaced governmental coordination and, in this context, officials became preoccupied with their own bureaucratic interests and political survival. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-il monopolized political power, and inter-agency coordination was possible only through him.

Such inter-departmental checks and balances were ever more prevalent in security and military organizations. For instance, the SSD had maintained an iminical relationship with the KPA since 1976, when Kim Il-sung used the SSD to purge KPA officers who opposed his power succession to his son. The SSD also uncovered a coup attempt in 1992, leading to a purge of 600 KPA officers (McEachern, 2010, p. 94). At the same time, Kim Jong-il checked the seemingly invincible SSD by controlling other security organizations from the KPA, including the Guard Command (GC) under the supervision of the KPA and the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces. The GC was a counterbalance to the SSD as well as the KPA, safeguarding the Kim regime. Meanwhile, the MPS counterbalanced the SSD and the GC. Supposedly, the cabinet supervised the MPS but, in reality, the cabinet was controlled directly by the NDC and Kim Jong-il. Originally, the MPS had been a mere cabinet agency, but it has recently been promoted to the ministry level, comparable to the MPAF and the SSD.

4. Implications for the post-Kim Jong-il era

The Kim Jong-il regime unexpectedly withstood multiple challenges to its survival. As this article has suggested, at the heart of Kim Jong-il’s regime survival was his mobilization of the KPA as a governing tool through his military-first politics and his concomitant maneuvers to control the military. By mobilizing the KPA, Kim Jong-il circumvented the power and prestige of the KWP and possible popular uprisings. At the same time, he invented a sophisticated system in which he controlled the powerful armed forces through personalistic control over military officers with carrots and sticks, a firm grip on security institutions and the invention of intra- and inter-institutional competition so that no single organization could emerge to threaten the regime’s security.

What was the legacy of Kim Jong-il’s military-first politics? Undoubtedly, Kim Jong-un has inherited both benefits and burdens from his father. The accession to power for such a young and politically inexperienced son would not have been possible without his father’s strong grip on the state and especially the military. To date, no dissenting political movements or coup attempts have surfaced in Pyongyang, which attests to the KPA’s inability (or reluctance) to exercise veto power over the young leader. The Kim family’s rule over North Korea, lasting three generations and spanning more than six decades, has persisted without noticeable political opposition.

However, the smooth power transition to Kim Jong-un is no guarantee of future regime stability. His father’s military-first politics—closing the door to the outside world and mobilizing the KPA to suppress possible rebellious movements—cannot be a long-term solution for the poverty-stricken country; if such extreme economic difficulties continue, both the people and eventually the elite will turn against the Kim dynasty. In this respect, the current ruler’s immediate task is to undertake extensive economic reforms to feed his people. Kim Jong-un’s political priorities should be to implement bold economic reforms and to restructure political power structures to circumvent the KPA’s political clout. When Kim Jong-un was introduced as the successor to his father, many people expected the son to be more reform-minded and flexible than his father. Indeed, Kim Jong-un has expressed an interest in foreign trade and direct investment as well as creating special economic zones in which North Korea and China would jointly venture in areas such as Hwanggeumpyong and Rajin-Seonbong (Mansourov, 2013). At the same time, he announced a bold agricultural reform, the “June 28 New Economic Management Measures,” in which the state would collect 70 percent of the production quota and the farm would have the freedom to keep any production above the quota and sell on the market at the market prices.

Another important priority for the current Kim regime should be to circumvent the KPA’s political domination. Kim Jong-un attempted to switch the locus of political power from the KPA to the KWP and the cabinet and weaken the military’s role in economic management. Such restructuring is clearly reflected in the April 2013 reshuffle of the KWP’s Central Committee: out of 17 members and 15 alternates of the Committee, only five members and six alternates are from the military and security sectors (Madden, 2013). Although it is not yet clear whether Kim Jong-un is willing to abandon his father’s military-first politics, such a deviation might trigger resistance from the KPA and weaken the regime’s power base. Kim Jong-un’s purge of Ri Young-ho (vice marshal, former member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, and former vice chairman of the KWP Military Commission) in July 2012 is emblematic of a tension between the cabinet and the military, as Ri and a group of KPA officers who opposed transferring the military control of 600 KPA officers (McEachern, 2010, p. 94).

In this respect, Kim Jong-un’s military-first politics may pose greatest challenges to his son’s political and economic reform agendas. Kim Jong-un’s bold economic reform initiatives during his first year has been overshadowed by subsequent military provocations—the satellite launch in December 2012 and the third nuclear test in February 2013—that led to UN Security Council Resolutions for tougher sanctions. While North Korea aims to bring the United States and South Korea to the bargaining table, such confrontational tactics undoubtedly have domestic political purposes. Immediately after the satellite launch and the nuclear test, North Korea’s news media lauded Kim Jong-un’s leadership and defiance of the superpower (Roh, 2013). Such provocative actions and ensuing security crisis situation seriously harm North Korea’s economy but bring the rally effect to the current Kim regime and strengthening of Kim’s political power against the KPA. Undeniably, Kim Jong-un seems to be concerned more about regime security than economic reforms. In the end, the Kim Jong-un regime’s success or failure will depend upon an intricate balance between moving away from military-first politics and embracing economic reform while keeping the KPA’s allegiance.
References