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studying accidental nuclear war; just because something has not happened, it does not mean that it will not occur in future

Instead, Kim Jong Il pursued a subtler strategy. He did not purge military elites, but instead he integrated more civilian elites into his ruling group and raised them up in prominence. These prominent civilian elites were empowered to help Kim Jong Un implement his preferred policies once he had taken power. Further, empowering these civilian elites and Kim Jong Un correspondingly reduced the chances of the military: 1) acting as a veto-player who would block the leader's preferred policies, or 2) even attempting to turn the leader into their puppet. Overall, Kim Jong Il's civilianizing of the ruling group as he prepared for succession was aimed at empowering civilian elites.

The Solution

Under Kim Jong Il, North Korea was an orthodox authoritarianism. The secretariat of the WPK was the main high-level policy alongside the Central Military Commission, and the state was run through the Party's policy implementation and day-to-day management. The military was represented in the upper echelons of power. The Politburo members were drawn from the Korean People's Army (KPA) from 1966-1985, and military leaders became more prominent in the most years leading to Kim Il Sung's death in 1994. Military leaders became more prominent at major public anniversaries during the Kim Il Sung period.²⁵

After Kim Il Sung died, the KPA rose to prominence while the other branches of the WPK largely withered. The official, public facing institutions of the Party, the Central Committee and Politburo, both ceased to meet after 1993, only reconvened in 2007, and no Party Congresses were held between the Sixth in 1980 and Kim Jong Il's death in 2011.²⁶ Conversely, following Kim Il Sung's death, military leaders became prominent at major events,²⁷ and a large percentage of leadership events were military centered. Military-centered form of rule was codified through the centering of the National Defense Commission as the supreme organ of the state in the amendments to the constitution in 1998, and before that, in the declaration of 'Military First Policy' (*Sungun'gchi*, *3v Æ:k@*) and the 'Military First Idea' (*S'ngunsasang*, *3v Æ:k@*) as the ideological bases for policies pursued by the regime.²⁸

Military first politics did not mean the military was placed in charge of the country, but Kim Jong Il did increase the number of military top elites surrounding him. Figure 1 shows the number of leadership elites in 1994 and 2011, divided by whether they were military or

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other types of events. Figure 1 shows that for most years up to the end of 2008, a large number of events that Kim attended were military in nature, and for several years (1996-1999 and 2003-2006) military events exceeded the total of all other types of events combined (arts, diplomatic, economic, political, and other).²⁹

Figure 1: Total Number of Military and Other Leadership Events, 1994-2011

Until his health began to deteriorate, Kim, unlike his father, had no immediate plans for succession. Kim reportedly said in 2006 after the country's first nuclear test that he planned to rule into his eighties or nineties (he was 65 at the time).³⁰

In August 2008, however, Kim Jong Il had a stroke, setting in motion a campaign that saw Kim Jong Un emerge as his successor. While orchestrating his son's succession, Kim Jong Il appears to have decided to rehabilitate the role of the central Party in North Ko

officially named successor and Kim Jong Il's number two at the Third WPK Party Conference in 2010, which also elected a new WPK Central Committee for the first time in 16 years.³¹

But the initial moves to empower civilian institutions began with Kim Jong Il's decision to strategically alter the size and composition of the elite that surrounded him. This is suggested by Figure 1, which shows non-military events suddenly far exceeded military events after 2008. More direct evidence is shown in Figure 2, which displays the proportion of military and civilian elites at leadership events before and after Kim Jong Il's stroke. The North Korean elite around Kim was highly militarized until just before his stroke. Elites drawn from the military comprised on average nearly half—a remarkable 47%—of all attendees at leadership events

The cause of this was not Kim suddenly declining to invite military officials to leadership events. Instead, Kim dramatically increased the number of civilian elites who attended leadership events to boost their standing and power within the elite. As Figure 3 shows, the average number of elites who attended public events before Kim's stroke was 4.29, but it jumped t

Policy Implications

Analysis of Kim Jong Il's preparations for succession raises implications for interpretation of more recent North Korean leadership politics, in part related to questions about future succession. The nature of the Kim regime means that information is scarce, and what little there is often arrives late. However, lessons from this analysis can enhance our understanding of certain contemporaneous political events in North Korea.

One of the key findings from our paper is that Kim Jong Il seems to have expanded the size of his inner circle when he felt the situation among the ruling elite in North Korea was potentially more unstable. This behavior is not unique to Kim Jong Il or even North Korea; dictators in other contexts use similar elite management techniques at times of vulnerability.³⁵ Is it possible to suppose Kim Jong Un behaves similarly? Below, we analyze changes in the size of Kim Jong Un's inner circle using data on leadership events from September 2011 to December 2021. If the assumption that Kim Jong Un increases the size of his inner circle at times of uncertainty holds, we may be able to identify periods when Kim Jong Un has felt less secure in his hold over the regime.

Figure 5 shows the average number of elites who attended public leadership events under Kim Jong Un. Similar to Kim Jong Il, a relatively high number of elites attended events in Kim Jong Un's early years. However, this sharply decreased in 2013 before rebounding somewhat in subsequent years.

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Figure 5 Average Number of Elites at Leadership Events, December 2011-September 2021

The sudden fall in the number of elites who attended events in mid-2013 corresponds with one of the biggest events of the Kim Jong Un era: the execution of his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, signified in Figure 5 by the leftmost vertical dotted line. When Jang was executed, North Korea observers were initially divided on how to interpret this event of seismic proportions. Some suggested it was a sign of instability as rival groups fought over power,³⁶ while others argued that Kim Jong Un had signaled his strength by taking out such a powerful elite,³⁷ a view that has gained greater traction in recent years. To quote Victor Cha again, “[e]very time we are in a recent ye

argument that Jang's arrest in the middle of a Politburo meeting was the culmination of a longer, drawn-out process of Jang's purge that officially commenced in May 2013³⁹. The change in the size of Kim's inner circle is consistent with this story; specifically, that after

Cover Image: View of Pyongyang from North Korea's capital.
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