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Introduction

The North Korean regime was not supposed to survive a second leader succession. Numerous North Korea observers expected the regime to fail with the accession of the 27-year-old Kim Jong Un.¹ For example, Victor Cha, former Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, wrote in a December 2011 *New York Times* op-ed entitled "China's Newest Province?" that whether North Korea "comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader."² Such expectations were reasonable since very few non-monarchical regimes have pulled off consecutive hereditary successions. Kim Jong Un has therefore defied expectations by not just surviving, but consolidating power.

Despite Kim Jong Un's relatively young age, succession may, surprisingly, already be a concern again for North Korea. Speculation since April 2020 about Kim's health has raised questions about the future.³ Even if Kim is unlikely to die or become incapacitated soon, the enormous implications of succession on the regime's stability mean it is important that we give it due consideration.⁴ Fortunately, events preceding Kim's succession in 2011 provide useful insights about future potential succession issues in North Korea, and elite politics in North Korea more generally.

So how did the North Korean regime pull off its second leader succession? Hundreds of articles and books explore who Kim Jong Un has purged once in power.⁵ Prominent purges include the July 2012 execution of the powerful military elite, Ri Yong Ho, and the December 2013 execution of Kim's uncle, Jang Song Thaek.

But to understand how Kim Jong Un has survived and consolidated power, we cannot just examine his actions after December 2011. We must also examine how Kim Jong Il laid the groundwork for his son. Unlike Kim Jong Il who was privately named successor in 1974, Kim Jong Un did not have years to prepare.⁶ His father's actions were crucial in facilitating his path to power and his ability to strengthen his grip on the regime once in office.

In the years preceding Kim Jong Un's succession (2008-2011), the Workers' Party of Korea

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⁶ >]uU : r Z }vx îííX <]u : }vP /o[• > œ•Z]‰o]yP)œ]œ ŠZ]œk}œ X

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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

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

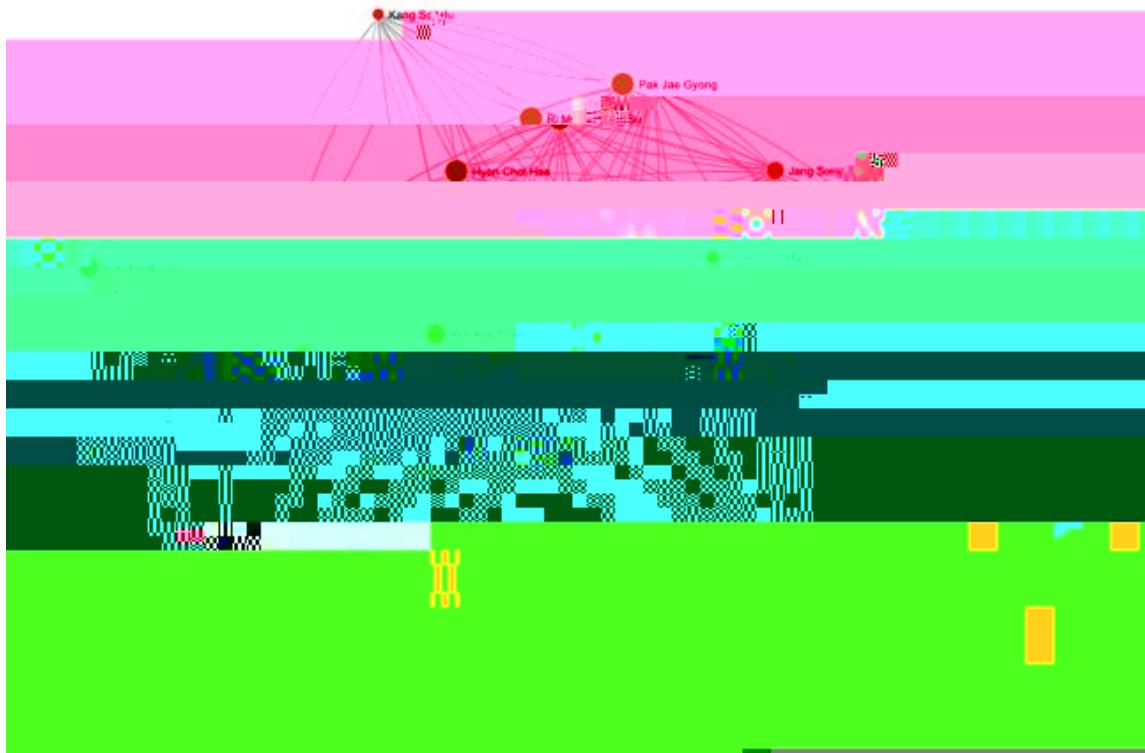
Until his health began to deteriorate, Kim, unlike his father, had no immediate plans for succession. Kim reportedly said in 2006 after the country's first nuclear test that he planned to rule into his eighties or nineties (he was 65 at the time).³⁰

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

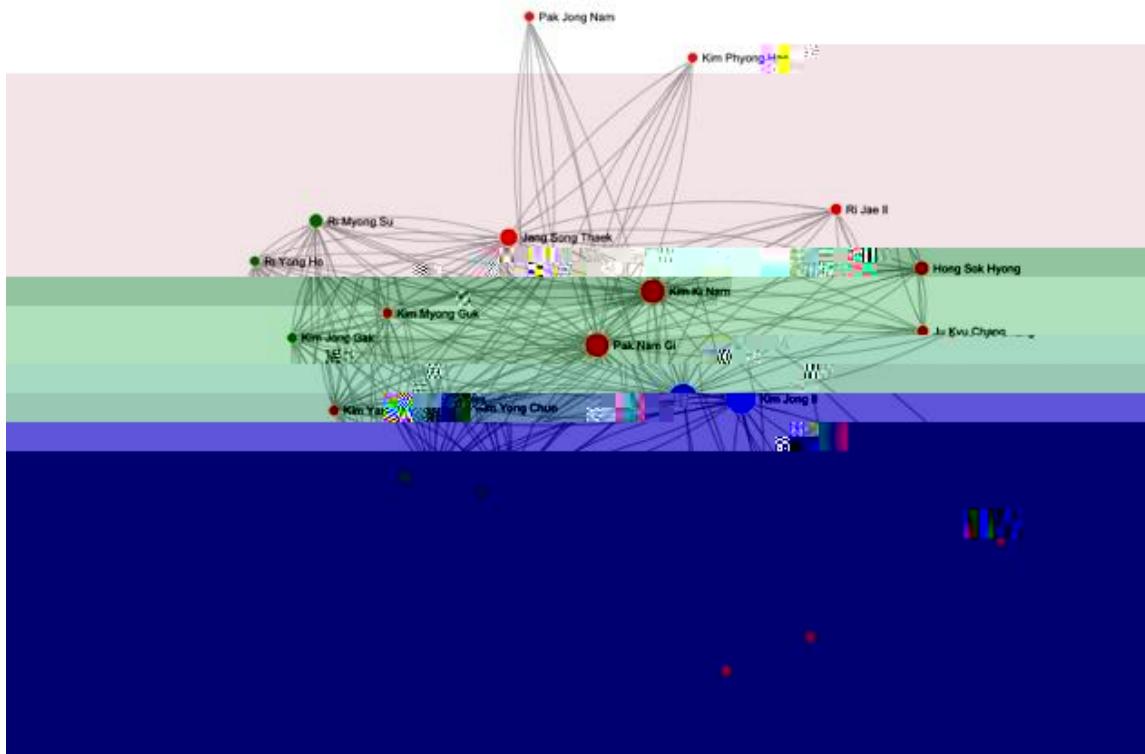
officially named successor and Kim Jong Il's number two at the Third WPK Party Conference in 2010, which also elected a new WPK Central Committee for the first time in 16 years.³¹

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 to



Panel B: February 2009



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.

³⁵ 朝鮮の内閣は、北朝鮮の内閣と同様に、内閣の構成員が内閣の外で開催される公的行事に出席する傾向があります。これは、内閣の運営が内閣の外で行われる場合、内閣の外で開催される公的行事に出席する傾向があります。

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 ai arecent 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 2013.³⁹ 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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