


# Power Transition in North Korea and Kim Jong Un's Leadership Style: Prospects for Reform and Opening

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by Haksoon Paik

July 3, 2012

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## I. Introduction

Haksoon Paik observes that over the past months, Kim Jong Un has displayed several new leadership styles characterized by more openness and transparency, which could potentially lead to reform. Paik notes that Kim Jong Un's new leadership style "seems to have attained popularity among North

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Koreans...[his] imitation of his grandfather's style also appears to have given people hope for a better future, reminding them of "those old good days" of the Kim Il Sung era...". Paik concludes that it is inevitable, under the circumstances, for Kim Jong Un's policies to be as independence (*juche*)-seeking, military-first and defensive against external security threats as his predecessors', but that Kim Jong Un shows signs of being more sensitive and responsive to the demands of the people from below in the domestic realm.

Haksoon Paik's article was previously presented at the conference on "Peace and Security on the Korean peninsula," which was coordinated and co-organized by the EU-Korea Institute (EKI) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and the Asia Centre on May 25, 2012 in Paris, France. The project is funded by the European Commission to promote public diplomacy and policy-research devoted to the EU and EU-Korea relations.

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## II. Article

"Power Transition in North Korea and Kim Jong Un's Leadership Style: Prospects for Reform and Opening"  
by Haksoon Paik

What is the overwhelming characteristic of the North Korean system and what has produced a rather "smooth" power transition in North Korea from father to son—that is, what were the agential and structural variables of it? What kinds of safeguards did Kim Jong Il (KJI) install for his son and how well did Kim Jong Un (KJU) exploit them for his power consolidation? What were the distinctive features of KJU's reshuffle of the power-elite lineup before and at the fourth party conference in April 2012? And what is new about KJU's leadership style and what are the prospects for reform and opening in North Korea?

### **Power Transition in North Korea: the Supreme Leader System and Agential and Structural Variables**

North Korea is a "supreme leader" (*suryong*) system in which the *suryong* places itself above the three key power institutions—i.e. the party, the military, and the state—and adjusts the relationships of the three institutions as the *suryong* sees most fit, when deemed necessary to accommodate changes in the interests of the leadership and the country. According to the "thesis on power successor" in North Korea, the *suryong* and his heir enjoy "the same absolute authority" and play "the same decisive roles." In other words, politically speaking, the incumbent *suryong* and his successor are one and the same.

Agential and structural variables/determinants combined to produce a rather "smooth" power transition from KJI to KJU and KJU's swift consolidation of power in North Korea. It has to be acknowledged that more continuity than change is found in both agential and structural variables in the power transition in North Korea, which in itself helped KJU achieve the authority and status of *suryong*, assuming the highest positions of the key power institutions that supreme leader

traditionally holds.

There are several variables at the level of leadership that contributed to the “smooth” power succession from KJI to KJU: the idea/concept/norm of *suryong* and the *suryong* system, popular indoctrination of and familiarization with the *suryong* system over decades without experiencing any other alternative political system, the thesis on power successor, the “do-or-die spirit” and “all-bomb spirit” to protect *suryong*, KJI’s alleged “October 8, 2011 will” that demanded that his sister Kim Kyong Hi (KKH) (KJU’s aunt) execute it, and, finally, KJU’s capability to consolidate his power, expanding his assets and reducing his liabilities under the circumstances.

There also exist several variables at the level of structure that helped power succession happen without any serious irregularities in North Korea: the *suryong* system itself that practically controls all aspects of the North Korean society, non-existence of rivals or viable challengers to KJU, the desire of power elites to consolidate/legitimate and benefit from their own family’s power succession from father to son in North Korea by supporting KJU’s three-generational power succession, “Korean-style socialism” based on “people-centered socialism,” “military-first” politics, and by and large, an unfavorable external environment derived from hostile/confrontational policies of the U.S., the ROK, Japan, and the EU countries toward North Korea.

### **KJI’s Double-Layered Safeguards for KJU and KJU’s Faithful Exploitation of Them**

Basically, what we see today in the power transition in North Korea reflects and extends what has been done and achieved till KJI’s death. KJI supervised the power transfer to his son with double-layered safeguards for him, and KJU was capable enough to exploit/implement his father’s scheme of power succession. After becoming heir apparent in September 2010, KJU quickly took control of the military and the intelligence with the full support of the two key power-holders Jang Song Taek (JST) (KKH’s husband) and Ri Young Ho under the supervision of KJI.

The double layers of safeguards KJI placed for his son included: the full restoration of the party’s authority so that it could keep the military in check—the military had grown disproportionately strong under the strategy of military-first politics; and the placement of Ri Young Ho in the position of overseeing the military and Choi Ryong Hae overseeing the party to counterbalance any potential threat to his son potentially from JST/KKH, the most powerful figures in North Korea after KJI and KJU.

It is noteworthy that KJU faithfully followed his father’s instructions. The order in the list of names of the KJI’s funeral committee showed that the authority of the party over the military was fully appreciated in North Korean politics. The military people who came rather early in the list did so because of their party ranks, not their military ranks. The priority of the party over the military was demonstrated again in the list of the names of the commemorative committee of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Il Sung’s birthday.

All this means that KJU appears to appreciate the need of the party’s control of the military even though he ostensibly entertained the military by emphasizing the importance of military-first idea and military-first leadership amidst recurring tension between the two Koreas and between North Korea and the U.S.

### **KJU’s Reshuffle of the Power-Elite Lineup**

KJU appears to have had three objectives when he reshuffled the power-elite lineup in North Korea on the occasion of the April 2012 party conference: first, to elevate the status of KKH and JST by promoting them to the full membership of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Korean

Workers' Party (KWP) and by advancing KKH to the Party Secretariat; second, to concretize his idea of the control of the military by the party by promoting Choi Ryong Hae to the Presidium of the Politburo of the KWP and appointing him Chief of the General Political Department (GPD) of the Korean People's Army; and third, to promote people with extensive GPD and military intelligence career backgrounds such as Kim Won Hong to the National Security Agency of North Korea.

It is noteworthy that KJU promoted his aunt and her husband KKH and JST to receive the most trusted help from them, but he also placed other key power-holders like Choi Ryong Hae, Ri Young Ho, Kim Won Hong, Kim Jong Gak (Minster of People's Armed Forces) to counter the power of his aunt and her husband, just to be safe. KJU's reshuffle of the power-elite lineup confirms his political acumen to faithfully implement/exploit his father-installed double-layered safeguards for himself. It has to be pointed out here that Cho Ryong Hae is so prominent these days that he conducts his own "on-the-spot understanding" to carry out KJU's "on-the-spot guidance."

The reshuffle also shows a shift in generations by placing relatively lesser-aged elites at the highest power positions: Choi Ryong Hae is 62; KKH and JST, 66; and Kim Won Hong, 67. Whether this will mean more flexibility and reform/opening in future policy remains to be seen, but it is clear that those people were positioned there to help the young leader KJU open his own new era.

### **KJU's Leadership Style and Prospects for Reform and Opening**

Over the past months, KJU has displayed several new leadership styles characterized by more "openness and transparency" potentially leading to "reform and opening" based on the value of "pragmatism": in January this year, his reported intent to improve economy by introducing capitalism and capitalist success models; in April, his immediate acknowledgement of the failed satellite rocket launch despite the advice of his subordinates to the contrary; on April 15, his live televised speech celebrating Kim Il Sung's centenary birthday for more than 20 minutes; in early May, his permission for the Japanese reporter to have "free" news coverage activities in Pyongyang; on May 9, his criticism of the mismanagement of and the lack of work ethic for the people at Mangyongdae amusement park and the TV coverage of it; instructions for the cadres to focus on the improvement of the living standards of the people and high-tech (IT) industry; removal of business hours limits for markets in Pyongyang and other cities; differentiation/rationalization of the market tax for produce and commodities; admonition of deceitful pig farms; and removal of extra school fees for the students and their families. KJU also showed unconventional personal behaviors while conducting his on-the-spot guidance: his people-friendly behavior such as taking photos arm in arm with soldiers, workers, etc.; frequent smiles; and unbuttoning of his jacket during his outdoor guidance to cool off himself on a hot day while videotaped by TV cameras.

[caption id="attachment\_25150" align="alignnone" width="600"]



Jinzhengen

inspection of the Korean People's Army Air Force guidance pilot training (2/8) from <http://world.huanqiu.com/>[/caption]

KJU's new leadership style seems to have attained popularity among North Koreans: he was first regarded as "young and inexperienced," but now as "young but able." KJU's imitation of his grandfather's style also appears to have given people hope for a better future, reminding them of "those old good days" of the Kim Il Sung era vs. the KJI's.

Basically, a new leader means a new policy. KJU appears to be more flexible as described above in the domestic realm with his *suryong* status established, but supposedly more rigid in dealing with the outside world considering the track record of confrontation. However, KJU appears to have already initiated a certain degree of tension reduction toward the U.S.: on May 22, the North Korean foreign ministry's spokesman revealed that "several weeks ago" North Korea "informed the U.S. side of the fact that we [North Korea] are restraining ourselves in real actions though we are no longer bound to the February 29 DPRK-U.S. agreement, taking the concerns voiced by the U.S. into consideration for the purpose of ensuring the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula necessary for focusing every effort on the peaceful development," and that "from the beginning, we [North Korea] did not envisage such a military measure as a nuclear test as we [North Korea] planned to launch a scientific and technical satellite for peaceful purposes." In response, Glyn Davies visited Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo and had consultations to help prevent North Korea's nuclear test and explore an opportunity to resume the Six-Party Talks.

Under the circumstances, KJU seems inevitably have to be independence (*juche*)-seeking, military-first and defensive against external security threats as were his predecessors, but more sensitive and responsive to the demands of the people from below in the domestic realm. To deal with popular demands and legitimate his rule, he will have to be more accommodating and adaptive to new changes and opportunities than his father was. It is noteworthy that KJU made his aunt KKH the party secretary in charge of "light industry" when he concentrates his energy and resources on improving people's living standards by providing food and daily necessities more.

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### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: [napsnet@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet@nautilus.org). Comments will only be posted if they include the author's name and affiliation.

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