
Another Perfect Storm? Predictors of Radical Change in North Korea

Benjamin Habib

Rapid internal transformation in North Korea is likely to occur through the confluence of change—a perfect storm—at key leverage points in the physical, ideational and institutional dimensions of the state. This article identifies four leverage points that merit close observation: (1) A reduction in the resource and income base of the regime elite. (2) A relaxation of informational controls would give the population a basis to compare their political system with those of other countries. (3) Endemic corruption which undermines key institutions of the state. (4) A power struggle resulting from an abrupt leadership transition.

Predicting futures for North Korea has proven difficult because the complex components of the state have not been holistically analysed. Whilst it is relatively easy to list a range of possible futures for the Democratic Peoples' Republic of North Korea (DPRK), the more difficult task is to identify the mechanisms by which rapid transformation may come about. Rather than map futures, analysts should identify key leverage points in the North Korean state that could trigger larger systemic changes. The following analysis identifies a framework of specific triggers—the key leverage points—that could slide North Korea toward regime failure and state collapse. The key leverage points are based on a framework of analysis utilising the three interlinked components of the state—the physical, ideational, and institutional dimensions—posited by Barry Buzan.¹ Change at any one of these leverage points is likely to activate change in the others in a feedback loop, leading to systemic transformation.

Such an analytical tool will be useful to Australian policy-makers and analysts because of the potential for instability in Korea to depress Australia's key export markets in Northeast Asia; China, Japan and South Korea are three out of Australia's four largest trading partners, with East Asia constituting fifty percent of Australia's international trade by region. Australia has concerns over nuclear proliferation and its probable involvement in a new Korean conflict, along with an interest in the emerging strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific region.² By paying close attention to the key leverage

¹ See: B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda For International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991), pp. 1-110.

² 'Summary of Australia's Trade: August 2007', Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2007, <http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/stats-pubs/mtd/australia_trade_0807.pdf> [Accessed 5 October 2007], p. 4. For a discussion of Australia's interests in the Korean nuclear

points identified in this paper, analysts and policy-makers can become aware of transformative change in North Korea almost as it occurs, allowing for contingency planning to ameliorate risk to Australia's regional interests.³

Buzan divided the state conceptually into three primary interlinked components: the physical base, the idea of the state, and its institutions. A state's physical base includes the population and resources within its defined territory.⁴ The idea of the state is the distinctive idea—the legitimising paradigm—that lies at the heart of the regime's political identity.⁵ The institutions of the state comprise the machinery of government, including the executive, legislative, administrative and judicial bodies.⁶ The institutions maintain dominion over its population and territory, a control materially subsidised by the physical base and legitimised by an overarching ideational framework. States within which all three components are well developed and inter-connected are usually stronger than states in which the three primary components are weak.⁷ Each of these interlinked dimensions need to be in mutually reinforcing terminal decay for state collapse to occur.

Each dimension has an important weakness that forms the basis for a key leverage point. In this manner an over-emphasis on the economic dimension can be avoided, providing a more rounded and reliable basis for prediction. This article identifies four important leverage points are identified that merit close observation:

- (1) In the physical base, a reduction in the resource and income base of the elite;
- (2) In the ideational base, a relaxation of informational controls;
- (3) In the institutional base, erosive endemic corruption, and
- (4) An abrupt leadership transition.

crisis, see: H. White and E. Wainwright, *Danger and Opportunity: Australia and the North Korea Crisis*, (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2003), pp. 8-9.

³ Despite its relative opacity, North Korea is not a complete information black hole. Primary sources including intelligence estimates from regional governments, mirror trades statistics, non-government organisation reports, media reports, defector testimony, and even official rhetoric from within the regime, can provide useful pieces of information to discern what is occurring at the key leverage points.

⁴ Buzan, p. 90.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 70.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 82-83.

⁷ K. Holsti, *The state, war, and the state of war* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 84.

Due to the highly integrated character of the North Korean state, variation at any one of the key leverage points is likely to trigger change at the others, leading to a perfect storm of wider systemic transformation.

Previous Predictions of Regime Collapse

The longevity of Kim Jong-Il's regime in North Korea has been a topic of much discussion since Kim's rise to power in the mid-1990s. Kim Kyung-won and Nicholas Eberstadt, among others, believed that the primary driver of the regime's collapse would be its economic weakness.⁸ North Korea was in "a spiral of economic degradation" due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, famine brought on by climatic disasters, systemic political inefficiency, Kim Jong-il's tenuous grip on power during the early years of his reign, and his apparent unwillingness to embrace economic reform, were cited as indications that regime collapse was imminent.⁹

State collapse results from a complex interplay of local and global economic, political, social and environmental factors culminating in the implosion of government structures. The security of the physical base can no longer be provided for by state institutions as law and order dissolves into a Hobbesian state of anarchy, as occurred in the Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the early 1990s.¹⁰ In the North Korean case, collapse would be caused by the convergence of input limitations—such as food shortages, restricted income streams and energy bottlenecks—along with the rejection of state ideology and the incapacity of state institutions to carry out their assigned functions. Kim and Eberstadt's collapse predictions proved premature because they did not utilise a holistic notion of state collapse in their analysis.

Their collapsist thesis bears more resemblance to the theory of *state failure*, which is a functional failure of state institutions from which recovery is possible, as in Cuba in 1959 and Iran in 1979.¹¹ In these cases the institutions of the state ceased to function and were replaced by new regimes, which reorganized the institutional structures. A collapsing regime will not necessarily endanger the integrity of the state, though collapse

⁸ See: K. Kim, 'No way out: North Korea's impending collapse', *Harvard International Review* vol. 18, no. 2 (1996), pp. 22-27; N. Eberstadt, 'Hastening Korean reunification', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 2 (1997), p. 81.

⁹ See: K. Kim, 'No way out: North Korea's impending collapse'; Eberstadt, 'Hastening Korean reunification', p. 81.

¹⁰ R. Bates *et al.*, 'Political Instability Task Force Report: Phase IV Findings', *Political Instability Task Force*, (Arlington: George Mason University, 2003), p. 9; J. Milliken and K. Krause, 'State Failure, State Collapse, and State Reconstruction: Concepts, Lessons and Strategies', *Development and Change*, vol. 33, no. 5 (2002), p. 765; A. Yannis, 'State Collapse and its Implications for Peace-Building and Reconstruction', *Development and Change*, vol. 33, no. 5, (2002), p. 822.

¹¹ Bates *et al.*, p. 9.

remains a possibility if the new leadership and its reconstituted governing institutions remain weak.¹²

In contrast to those espousing state collapse or failure, Marcus Noland wrote that North Korea would “muddle through,” making ad hoc adjustments to fix specific problems.¹³ The establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) at Rajin-Sonbong, Sinuiju, and most successfully at Kaesong, is its most obvious manifestation. The SEZs are an attempt to generate foreign exchange and acquire Western technology in enclosed cantons where foreign influences can be isolated from the rest of the country. While such changes are significant, they fall well short of wholesale systemic reform.

Dominique Dwor-Frécaut and Li Dunqiu have suggested the SEZs are evidence of a slow and pragmatic reform agenda to improve economic management, attract foreign direct investment, and expand foreign trade.¹⁴ They argue the regime is pursuing a development strategy based on the “mosquito net” analogy: letting developers and advanced technology in while keeping capitalist and Western political ideas out, just as a mosquito net allows air to pass through whilst preventing the entry of mosquitoes.¹⁵

Other scholars suggest the regime would not be able to carry out systemic reforms without jeopardising its power.¹⁶ They cite the following as obstacles to reform: first, breaking with *Juche* would mean discarding the legitimising philosophy of Kim Il-Sung, from which Kim Jong-Il derives his legitimacy to rule. Second, *Juche* has guided the personal and professional lives of party cadres for over forty years. These functionaries are not equipped with the intellectual knowledge or practical experience necessary to direct a wider reform program. Third, regime elites may fear losing their privileged positions if reforms bring about wide systemic change. Kim’s survival might not be assured should reforms challenge the favoured status of regime elites. Fourth, resistance to change by the old guard remains strong; the patriarch’s philosophy cannot be dismantled without loss of face to the old revolutionaries.

¹² C. Moon and Y. Kim, 'The Future of the North Korean System', in S. Kim (ed.), *The North Korean System in the Post Cold War Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 228.

¹³ See: M. Noland, 'Why North Korea Will Muddle Through', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 4 (1997), pp. 105-118.

¹⁴ See: D. Dwor-Frécaut, *Korea: Long-term Decline in the North Korea Premium* (London: Barclays Capital Research, 2004), <<http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/transition/NorthKoreaDDF27Feb04.pdf>> [Accessed 10 December 2007]; D. Li, 'DPRK's Reform and Sino-DPRK Economic Cooperation', 23 August 2006, <<http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0670Li.html>> [Accessed 02/11/2006].

¹⁵ Bruce Cumings uses the “mosquito net” analogy to describe the reform program. See: B. Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2004), p. 191.

¹⁶ A. Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), pp. 245-246; Moon and Kim, pp. 245-251; K. Asmolov, 'North Korea: Stalinism, Stagnation, or Creeping Reform?', *Far Eastern Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2005), p. 28; K. Oh and R. Hassig, 'North Korea between Collapse and Reform', *Asian Survey*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1999), p. 309.

North Korea is a unique case in which the ruling regime has become synonymous with the state itself through the close-knit integration of its constituent dimensions under the personalised leadership of Kim Jong-il.¹⁷ When the country teetered on the brink of institutional failure during the late 1990s the state neither failed nor collapsed because its other components remained strong. As a result, the academic consensus has shifted behind Noland's muddle through thesis. Most analysts—including former collapsists Eberstadt and Kim—are in agreement that the regime will continue to survive by making limited changes to its economy, generating foreign exchange where it can through military and illicit exports, and extracting aid from the international community.¹⁸

However, the DPRK state remains vulnerable to internal implosion because persistent weaknesses exist in its physical, ideational and institutional dimensions. Reform, if it occurs, will be piecemeal and slow. Deterioration of the state can occur rapidly, due to changes at the key leverage points. Consequently, state failure and collapse remain distinct possible outcomes to North Korea's present crisis.

The Physical Base: Agriculture and Economy

The physical base of the North Korean state is limited by agricultural inefficiency, energy shortages and management-related roadblocks. These problems are generating insecurity in the food supply, as exemplified in the annual food shortage, and in reduced income for sections of the regime elite. These create negative feedbacks for leverage points in the ideational and institutional bases of the state. Thus, a reduction in the resource and income base of the regime elite is identified as the first key leverage point.

FOOD INSECURITY

Recurrent famine has been a feature of the Korean peninsula for many centuries due to the inhospitability of its topography and climate. North Korea has the world's smallest percentage of arable land per person due to its mountainous terrain. This has been exacerbated by population growth, which has expanded well beyond the natural carrying capacity of the land base.¹⁹ Various communist-inspired farming and land clearing practices were introduced in an effort to boost domestic food production.²⁰ These

¹⁷ C. Armstrong, 'The Nature, Origins, and Development of the North Korean State', in S. Kim (ed.), *The North Korean System in the Post Cold War Era*, p. 57.

¹⁸ K. Kim, 'Downfall Delayed: Endgames for the North Korean Regime', *Harvard International Review*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2006), pp. 56-60; N. Eberstadt, 'Why Hasn't North Korea Collapsed? Understanding the Recent Past, Thinking About the Future', in Y. Kihl and H. Kim (eds.), *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (New York: East Gate Books, 2006), pp. 268-298.

¹⁹ D. Pinkston and P. Saunders, 'Seeing North Korea Clearly', *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2003), pp. 84-85.

²⁰ A. Mansourov, *Disaster Management and Institutional Change in the DPRK: Trends in the Songun Era*, Korea Economic Institute, 2007, <<http://www.keia.org/2-Publications/mansourov.pdf>> [Accessed 11 October 2007], p. 9.

strategies proved destructive and as a result, many agricultural regions are now flood-prone, eroding valuable topsoil and land reclaimed through mountain terracing.²¹ Mismanagement of the land base, combined with floods and drought during 1995-98, contributed directly to a crisis in food production with which the regime was unable to cope, leading to the great famine.²²

An important pillar of all communist countries has been the creation of large-scale mechanised agriculture, centred on enormous state-owned collective farms.²³ During the 1960s Kim Il-sung introduced a system of industrial agriculture based on mechanisation, mass irrigation and the widespread use of chemicals. Over time, this system experienced declining returns as soils became exhausted through over-production and excessive chemical use.²⁴ The decline accelerated after 1991 as generous petroleum subsidies ceased, creating energy shortages that turned immobilized farm machinery and diesel irrigation pumps. Though production has recovered somewhat, the North remains dependent on food aid from international donors—principally South Korea, China and the United States, as well as international organisations such as the UN World Food Program—to fill a food shortfall of between twenty to thirty percent.²⁵ Food insecurity is the regime's great Achilles heel because shortages undermine *Juche* ideology through continued reliance on foreign donors, and demonstrate the institutional weakness of its food distribution system.

Kim Kyung-Won has argued that international aid has been decisive in preventing the North's collapse. Kim argues that cash payments made by the Hyundai group to the regime during 1999-2000 amounted to approximately twenty percent of its total foreign exchange earnings, and were a decisive injection of funds as the regime struggled to overcome the famine period.²⁶ Energy shortages have been eased by fuel subsidies from China, though by no means is the fuel supply completely reliable. Aid has become an important economic input upon which the regime has become dependent.

²¹ Ibid.

²² 'A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger', *Human Rights Watch*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2006), <<http://hrw.org/reports/2006/northkorea0506/northkorea0506web.pdf>> [Accessed 10 October 2007], p. 1.

²³ I. Volgyes, 'The Economic Legacies of Communism', in Z. Barany and I. Voldyes (eds.), *The Legacies of Communism in Eastern Europe* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 44.

²⁴ B. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and Kim Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), p. 161.

²⁵ 'Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation—Democratic People's Republic of Korea', World Food Program, 2006, <http://www.wfp.org/operations/current_operations/project_docs/104880.pdf> [Accessed 19 April 2007], p. 5-6; 'A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger', p. 16-17.

²⁶ Kim, 'Downfall Delayed: Endgames for the North Korean Regime', p. 57.

North Korea remains vulnerable to economic distress, whether from natural disasters or withdrawal of external aid, threatening the breakdown of state institutions and the well-being of a large portion of the population.²⁷ Chinese and South Korean concerns about regime stability should see those governments continue food aid into the future. The Chinese would like to avoid the large social-economic costs of absorbing a significant refugee influx from a collapsed North Korea, while the South Koreans are concerned about the hefty price tag of reunification.²⁸ These considerations drive both countries robust economic support for the Kim regime and undermine attempts by the United States to pursue a hard line with Pyongyang at the level of multilateral diplomacy.

The great famine of the late-1990s led to starvation amongst the peasantry and those in the population not linked explicitly to the party or military: those least able to adjust to tightening economic conditions by producing their own food or selling their own labour in exchange for food.²⁹ It also forced the regime to tolerate unrestricted internal travel to allow people to find food, with corrupt low-level officials benefiting from facilitating the movement of illegal travelers.³⁰ The proliferation of internally displaced persons destabilised the strict system of travel restrictions which kept people rooted in one place. Localisation traditionally kept individuals isolated and made surveillance and social control easier for the coercive organisations. Domestic surveillance became more difficult as people were able to move around the country more freely. In each case, the totalitarian controls imposed by agricultural collectivisation, food rationing and travel restrictions were undermined.³¹ The public distribution system imploded under the strain of food shortage and crumbling distribution infrastructure, which was emasculated by fuel shortages. The primacy of the command economy was weakened by the growth of private farmers markets.

Kim Jong-Il may confront a scenario in which the agricultural and industrial capacity servicing the military and party elite—already weak, as evidenced by the annual food shortfall—is undermined by calamitous natural events or by international donor fatigue. It is not clear however what minimum level of resource procurement is necessary to sustain the elite and at what point of

²⁷ N. Marinov, 'Do Economic Sanctions Destabilise Country Leaders?', *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2005), p. 804.

²⁸ A. Scobell and M. Chambers, 'The Fallout of a Nuclear North Korea', *Current History*, vol. 104, no. 683 (2005), p. 292; T. Carpenter and D. Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 35.

²⁹ A. Natsios, 'The Politics of Famine in North Korea', United States Institute of Peace, 1999, <<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr990802.pdf>> [Accessed 22 August 2006], p. 1.

³⁰ J. Hwang, 'Hwang Jangyop Holds Press Conference To Explain Why He Defected from North Korea', 21 July 2007, <<http://www.fas.org/news/dprk/1997/bg152.html>> [Accessed 15/05/2007].

³¹ A. Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea: The Leader and the System* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2006), p. 35; S. Snyder, 'North Korea's Challenge of Regime Survival: Internal Problems and Implications for the Future', *Pacific Review*, vol. 73, no. 4 (2000), p. 520.

erosion a backlash against the leadership may occur.³² Human Rights Watch has documented defectors from the military who report that their food ration has decreased and that it was not uncommon for soldiers to face hunger.³³ Media reports indicate that the flooding events of July-August 2007 caused significant damage to agricultural land, decreasing the availability of rice and cereal crops, consequently leading to an increased number of deaths from malnutrition.³⁴ The tipping point may come when mid- and high-ranking officers are confronted with severely reduced access to food. Should this tipping point be reached, key figures may begin to see support for the status quo as a losing gambit creating a disconnect between the leadership and its governing institutions.

THE WEAK CIVILIAN ECONOMY

Kim Il-Sung originally based the North's economic development on heavy industry, as was typical of communist economies. Its initial success, however, became a liability as the national economy grew more complex.³⁵ Industrial decay was caused by systemic inefficiencies in the central planning mechanism that became terminal during the 1970s, which created bottlenecks of resources and manpower throughout the economy.³⁶ Heavy industry, like mechanised agriculture, is energy-intensive and sensitive to petroleum shortages. Energy scarcity has forced the closure of factories and the transportation infrastructure, decreasing the availability of manufactured goods and slowing the supply of components to other factories.³⁷ Many factories have closed down altogether because frequent shutdowns have made continued operation pointless. Energy shortages and systemic misallocation have decimated the country's industrial sector. Not only do they represent a major obstacle to improving production in both the industrial and agricultural sectors, but they were the points at which these sectors and their associated institutions broke down during the famine period.

³² Snyder, pp. 527-528.

³³ 'A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger', p. 11.

³⁴ See: 'Deaths from hunger rise across N. Korea: civic group', Yonhap News Agency, 18 July 2007, <<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2007/07/18/88/0401000000AEN20070718007600315F.HTML>> [Accessed 23 August 2007]; 'Huge Damage by Torrential Rain', Korean Central News Agency, 13 August 2007, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2007/200708/news08/14.htm#11>> [Accessed 17 August 2007]; B. Herman, 'Aid Groups Seek to Help Flooded N. Korea', 17 August 2007, <http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/N/NKOREA_RAIN?SITE=CAGRA&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT> [Accessed 17 August 2007].

³⁵ Kim Il-sung, 'Let us embody the revolutionary spirit of independence, self-sustenance and self-defence more thoroughly in all fields of state activity', In *For the Independent, Peaceful Reunification of the Country* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1973), p. 129; P. French, *North Korea: The Paranoid Peninsula - A Modern History* (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp. 77-78.

³⁶ A. Nove, *Political Economy and Soviet Socialism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), pp. 155-156; Volgyes, pp. 44-45; B. Seliger, 'The North Korean Economy: Nuclear Crisis and Decline, or Peace and Reform in the Last Asian Dynastic Regime?' *Korea's Economy* (2004), p. 79.

³⁷ French, pp. 100-101.

PARALLEL ECONOMIES

The foreign threat posed by the United States, to varying degrees real and exaggerated, has spurred mobilisation of North Korea into a garrison state under the rubric of *Military-first Politics*. The idea first entered public consciousness in 1995 when a series of articles in *Nodong Sinmun* indicated that the KPA had become the most important state organ in North Korea.³⁸ The North's sizeable conventional forces—including 1.2 million full-time military personnel and 7.5 million reservists—have created an enormous parallel military economy which provisions this large fighting force.³⁹ It is commonly assumed that the North's military-industrial complex sucks resources and manpower away from the civilian economy into commercially unproductive activities.⁴⁰ However, the leadership regards the military economy as a self-sustaining driver of economic activity.⁴¹ The military is involved in the export of weapons and primary products as well as civilian infrastructure projects such as land reclamation, road building, agriculture, housing construction, and mining that add value to the society and decrease the military's negative impact on the economy.⁴² The 2003 DPRK defence budget has been estimated at approximately US\$5 billion, representing 27.2 percent of GDP and 44.4 percent of the total government budget.⁴³ One could argue that in North Korea the weak civilian economy is becoming peripheral to the expansive garrison state military economy.

The weakness of the civilian economy is also counter-balanced by the illicit economy. North Korea's illicit economy is a lucrative source of foreign exchange encompassing activities such as narcotics production and

³⁸ See: B. Koh, "Military-First Politics" And Building A "Powerful And Prosperous Nation" in North Korea', 14 April 2005, <<http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0532AKoh.html>> [Accessed 22 June 2007]; T. Kim, 'Pathology of North Korea's Military-First Politics', 24 August 2006, <http://www.koreafocus.or.kr/main_view.asp?volume_id=51&cate_code=A&g_cate_code=AB&g_code=101246> [Accessed 10 October 2006]; D. Pinkston, 'North Korea's Foreign Policy Towards the United States', *Strategic Insights*, vol. V, no. 7 (2006), p. 3; A. Vorontsov, 'North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing?', 26 May 2006, <<http://www.brookings.edu/views/op-ed/fellows/vorontsov20060526.htm>> [Accessed 13 April 2007].

³⁹ A. Scobell and J. Sanford, *North Korea's Military Threat: Pyongyang's Conventional Forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Ballistic Missiles* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2007), pp. 5-6; 'Country Profile: North Korea', US Library of Congress, 2007, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/North_Korea.pdf> [Accessed 1 September 2007], p. 18.

⁴⁰ K. Quinones, 'Reconciling Nuclear Standoff and Economic Shortfalls', in Kihl and Kim (eds.), p. 93.

⁴¹ This April 2003 excerpt from *Nodong Sinmun* shows the regime's confidence in the military as a self-sustaining organism: "Once we lay the foundations for a powerful self-sustaining national defence industry, we will be able to rejuvenate all economic fields, to include light industry and agriculture and enhance the quality of people's lives." See: 'Military-First Ideology Is an Ever-Victorious, Invincible Banner for Our Era's Cause of Independence', 11 April 2003, <http://www.nautilus.org/archives/pub/ftp/napsnet/special_reports/MilitaryFirstDPRK.txt> [Accessed 1 June 2007].

⁴² Koh; J. Pollack, 'The Strategic Futures and Military Capabilities of the Two Koreas', in A. Tellis and M. Wills (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2005-06: Military Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005), p. 144.

⁴³ 'Country Profile: North Korea', p. 18.

distribution, counterfeiting, and money laundering.⁴⁴ David Asher believes the illicit economy may account for between thirty and forty percent of the North's total exports, contributing to an even larger slice of total earnings.⁴⁵ The parallel military and illicit economies are strengths of the North's physical base, providing a prop for the regime in the face of other challenges. The true significance of revenue generated by illicit sources was suggested by the regime's refusal to return to nuclear negotiations in late 2006 until US\$24 million in frozen North Korean money, held in Macao's Banco Delta Asia bank, was released.⁴⁶

Chronic economic distress has not led to complete economic implosion because of the robustness of parallel economies and their ability to perform services and generate foreign exchange. Without the services and revenue provided by the parallel economies, the resource pool available to North Korea's elite from the physical base of the state would diminish significantly, damaging the patronage networks that have cemented Kim Jong-il's leadership. Kim has bolstered his power by providing high-level officials with privileged access to food and gifts of expensive foreign imports.⁴⁷ Alexandre Mansourov has argued that elite unity decreases when economic rewards replace party loyalty as a motivator for political support.⁴⁸ Should income from illicit sources decrease, for example through foreign policing measures such as the US Illicit Activities Initiative, Kim's ability to finance this patronage network may be compromised, leading to wavering support amongst top officials in key state institutions.

The Ideas of the State: Kimism, Juche and Military-first Politics

North Korea is a country that defies conventional characterization. Communism and strong traditional Confucianism have fused together to produce two unique ideational pillars: the Kim Il-Sung personality cult (Kimism), and *Juche*, the official ideology. Nearly two decades of constant crises are taking their toll, exposing the incongruence of official ideology and

⁴⁴ S. Chestnut, *The "Sopranos State?" North Korean Involvement in Criminal Activity and Implications for International Security* (Stanford University: Center for International Security and Cooperation, 2005), <<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/2006/0605Chestnut.pdf>> [Accessed 23 July 2006], p. 68; M. Noland, 'How North Korea Funds Its Regime', 25 April 2006, <<http://www.iie.com/publications/papers/paper.cfm?ResearchID=629>> [Accessed 18 March 2007].

⁴⁵ D. Asher, 'The North Korean Criminal State, Its Ties to Organized Crime, and the Possibility of WMD Proliferation', 15 November 2005, <<http://nautilus.org/fora/security/0592Asher.html>> [Accessed 25 August 2006].

⁴⁶ S. Chestnut, 'Illicit Activity and Proliferation: North Korean Smuggling Networks', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2007), p. 93.

⁴⁷ Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea*, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁸ A. Mansourov, 'Emergence of the Second Republic: The Kim Regime Adapts to the Challenges of Modernity', in Kihl and Kim (eds.), p. 55; See also: Chestnut, 'Illicit Activity and Proliferation: North Korean Smuggling Networks', p. 107.

propaganda with the harsh reality of daily life. The Kim Il-Sung personality cult is losing its power under Kim Jong-Il, while the message of self-sufficiency stressed by *Juche* is being undermined by the country's poor economic performance and reliance on international aid.

Tight information controls have for the most part prevented most North Koreans from learning about the outside world. Lack of exposure to new ideas has prevented citizens from forming a basis for comparison with their own society.⁴⁹ Along with strict restrictions on collective activities, information controls have stifled the development of visible opposition movements, despite extreme hardship. The relaxation of informational controls—the second key leverage point—could trigger the mobilisation of mass opposition to the regime. The level of penetration of information from abroad should be watched closely as a harbinger of wider transformation, as should the incidence of reports of anti-regime activity coming from within the hermit state.

KIMISM AND JUCHE: RHETORIC AND REALITY

Kimism is a personality cult built around Kim Il-Sung, based heavily on his exploits as an anti-Japanese guerrilla leader during the Japanese occupation.⁵⁰ Kimism is broader than the ideological core of communism. It plays on the central Confucian ideas of political centralisation and obedience to authority to superimpose family and kinship loyalties with loyalty to the leader and the state.⁵¹ Kimism provided the legitimising paradigm for the concentration of power in the hands of Kim Il-Sung, backed by an elite core whose rule was administered by the Korean Workers Party (KWP). Kim Jong-Il's legitimate claim to rule is derived from the genealogical link to his father through Confucian notions of filial piety and ancestor worship of Kim as the "father" of the North Korean state.⁵²

The strength of these ideational pillars may be beginning to fade. While Kim Il-Sung is still much loved, the veneration has not extended to Kim Jong-Il. According to Alexander Vorontsov, there may be a conscious effort

⁴⁹ Cognitive dissonance occurs where a person encounters new information about a given topic that cannot be rationalised away by currently held belief and ideas, causing psychological discomfort. This discomfort leads the person to seek or develop new paradigms for interpreting that topic. See: L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Tavistock Publications, 1962), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Official propaganda regularly features heroic stories of the feats of Kim's partisans in Manchuria, as this excerpt from a KCNA news article (16 December 2006) shows: "The theory on the people's guerrilla warfare reflected the unswerving will of the President to defeat the Japanese imperialists with the united strength of the Korean people and achieve the liberation of the country at any cost." See: 'Unique Theory on People's Guerrilla War in World History of War', Korean Central News Agency, 16 December 2006, <<http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2006/200612/news12/18.htm>> [Accessed 22 January 2007].

⁵¹ Buzo, p. 48.

⁵² Snyder, p. 519; C. Moon and H. Takesada, 'North Korea: Institutionalized Military Intervention', in M. Alagappa (ed.), *Coercion and Governance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 380.

underway on the part of the regime to roll back the Kimist personality cult in favour of promoting military-first politics.⁵³ The latter has been far more successful than Kimism as an economic pillar and ideological rallying point since the famine period. This may reflect the fading power of the personality cult. While veneration of Kim Il-sung may remain potent, the relevance of the personality cult to everyday survival and regime perpetuation has diminished.

Juche is a philosophy of self-reliance and insularity, of survivalism and powerful post-colonial ethnocentrism.⁵⁴ Its precise definition is elusive, perhaps because over time it has been subtly reinterpreted to legitimise changing regime policies. The core goals of *Juche* are the maintenance of a thriving self-reliant national economy operating in a secure environment, guarded by indigenous defence forces.⁵⁵ To these ends, *Juche* has legitimised the continued operation of the North's centrally planned economy, isolated from the global marketplace, around which a garrison state has developed. The Korean People's Army (KPA) assumed the mantle of heroic defender of modern North Korea, safeguarding the country from external aggression so the internal economy could flourish.

This image contrasts starkly with North Korea's present reality: a floundering economy propped up by aid from the very enemies the KPA is mobilised against. The presence of international aid organisations in North Korea is a direct challenge to *Juche* because it destroys the myth of national self-reliance. Barry Buzan states that the ideas and the institutions of the state are inseparably intertwined; thus the ideational pillars are useless without the institutions to put them into practice, just as the institutions are pointless and even impossible without these ideas to give them definition and purpose.⁵⁶ Without *Juche* as a practical guide and legitimising paradigm, the institutions of the North Korean state will lose their reason for existence, the officials within the motivation to carry out their duties, and the citizenry the non-coercive stimulus for compliance.

INFORMATION CONTROLS: IGNORANCE OF ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS

It is unimaginable for North Koreans to publicly express dissent against the regime. Apart from fear of the coercive institutions, the average worker or farmer is probably preoccupied with the desperate struggle for subsistence.⁵⁷

⁵³ From 2004, Kim Jong-il was to be described only by his official titles, rather than the epithet of "Dear Leader," while public portraits of Kim Il-sung were limited to one per location. See: Vorontsov.

⁵⁴ B. Cumings, 'The Corporate State in North Korea', in H. Koo (ed.), *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 213-214; French, pp. 30-31.

⁵⁵ H. Park, *North Korea: The Politics of Unconventional Wisdom* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002), pp. 20-27.

⁵⁶ Buzan, p. 86.

⁵⁷ Snyder, p. 518; C. Kang and P. Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 141.

They may have doubts about the system, but no avenue through which to discuss their thoughts with others, which would lead most citizens to abandon political thought altogether and acquiesce to the official dogma.⁵⁸ Even the thought of raising questions in one's own mind would be a cross too heavy to bear in such an environment. As survival is the leading imperative, most North Koreans probably avoid the complication of pondering subversive questions.

Nevertheless, reports do surface—through the anecdotal testimony of defectors and video footage smuggled out of the country—indicating the presence of underground dissent within North Korea. Journalist David Scofield has described video footage in which:

the videographer entered a warehouse and filmed a sign taped to the wall that said "Overthrow (North Korean leader) Kim Jong-il. Comrades, let's fight ..." Later the camera moved to a picture of the Dear Leader himself, with the words "Kim Jong-il, we demand freedom and democracy ..." written in red script across his beaming face.⁵⁹

At the very least, the increased frequency with which such information is coming to light outside North Korea suggests that the regime's ability to restrict the flow of information in and out of the country may be diminishing.

North Korea's elites face a similar dilemma to the rank and file in facing the complications of harbouring internal doubts, yet they have the blessing and the curse of being better informed than the masses. The elite, comprising several thousand top party and military officials, have access to restricted government publications featuring international and domestic news. Some of their number may even have traveled abroad for education or official business. Such officials probably understand the contradictions of official ideology and recognise the glaring practical problems facing the regime, but are unable to raise concerns out of fear of punishment.⁶⁰

As company men and women, staunch nationalists or active rent-seekers, such officials are wedded to the status quo.⁶¹ This is common to most

⁵⁸ K. Oh and R. Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 37.

⁵⁹ D. Scofield, 'Kim Jong-il and the 'A' word', 21 January 2005, <<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/GA21Dg01.html>> [Accessed 12 August 2007].

⁶⁰ North Korean defector Ji Hae-nam worked as a propaganda member in the government bureaucracy: "I went around explaining and promoting party policy to everyone in several factories. I shouted out slogans such as What the Party decides, we follow" encouraging all workers with my songs to complete their tasks within the set timeframe. In 1989 when the 13th Party Convention was held I began having skepticisms about the inappropriate actions of party cadres. At that time anyone who raised an issue against the wrongdoings of the deified cadres was punished." See: H. Ji, 'Testimony of Mrs. Hae-Nam Ji, North Korean defector', 5 June 2003, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, <<http://www.senate.gov/~foreign/testimony/2003/NamJiTestimony030605.pdf>> [accessed 12 April 2007], p. 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*; Oh and Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, p. 38.

communist countries; low- and mid-level officials in over-sized state bureaucracies are dependent on a strong state sector for their livelihoods, no matter what their personal beliefs.⁶² These people may have an acute understanding of the system's contradictions, but they have less freedom to discuss such issues because they are subjected to even greater internal surveillance than the masses.⁶³ Thus it is likely that regime elites also disengage themselves from subversive political thought to avoid the discomfort facing intractable contradictions over which they have negligible control.

No organised opposition can develop when citizens with doubts cannot discuss their thoughts with others. Without collective debate there can be no reinterpretation of national myths and philosophies, which perpetuates the strong veneer of pro-regime mass consensus. This does not mean, however, that the national myths and philosophies enjoy true legitimacy among the population; as the examples of above suggest, the reservoir of pent-up public frustration with the regime may indeed be vast. Mass mobilisation, visible in protests and acts of civil disobedience are the most visible signs of state weakness, showing that a government has lost its popular legitimacy.⁶⁴

This is why the relaxation of informational controls is a key indicator of approaching political change, as increasing flows of information could unleash the mass mobilisation of previously isolated individuals. Moon Chung-in and Kim Yong-ho note that exposure to new ideas could trigger "a shared feeling of cognitive dissonance and even relative deprivation," leading to the expansion of dissident civil society beyond regime control.⁶⁵ It is clear from this excerpt from *Nodong Sinmun* on April 20th, 2003, that the regime is wary of mass exposure to foreign ideas:

It is the imperialist's old trick to carry out ideological and cultural infiltration prior to their launching of an aggression openly. Their bourgeois ideology and culture are reactionary toxins to paralyse people's ideological consciousness. Through such infiltration, they try to paralyse the independent consciousness of other nations and make them spineless. At the same time, they work to create illusions about capitalism and promote lifestyles among them based on the law of the jungle, in an attempt to

⁶² J. Curry, 'The Sociological Legacies of Communism', in Barany and Voldyes (eds.), pp. 62-63.

⁶³ Oh and Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, p. 38-9.

⁶⁴ Holsti, p. 118-119; M. Deane, 'The Collapse of North Korea: A Prospect to Celebrate or Fear?', Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2005, <<http://www.jhuapl.edu/areas/warfare/papers/NorthKorea.pdf>> [accessed 4 September 2006], p. 6.

⁶⁵ Moon and Kim, p. 237. North Korean defector Kang Chol-Hwan described the impact on his worldview of hearing radio broadcasts from South Korea: "Listening to the radio gave us the words we needed to express our dissatisfaction. Every program, each new discovery, helped us tear a little freer from the enveloping world of deception. Knowledge that there was a counterpoint to official reality was already a kind of escape, one that could exhilarate as well as confuse. It is difficult to explain, for example, the emotions we felt on hearing it demonstrated, proof positive, that the North had actually started the Korean War, not the American imperialists, as we had always been told." See: Kang and Rigoulot, p. 186.

induce the collapse of socialist and progressive nations. The ideological and cultural infiltration is their silent, crafty and villainous method of aggression, intervention and domination.⁶⁶

The regime's tight informational controls clearly indicate that it fears information seeping into the country from outside, especially from South Korea.

The penetration of information technologies into North Korea is beginning to increase. Some citizens have access to radios that have been recalibrated to pick up short-wave broadcasts of Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, beamed from South Korea.⁶⁷ Citizens living in regions along the northern frontier can access Chinese cell phone networks if they can afford a mobile phone. Approximately twenty thousand North Koreans living along the Chinese frontier had access to mobile phones as of early 2005.⁶⁸ More than half of all North Koreans have watched banned South Korean movies and television programs that have been smuggled into the country on video and DVD.⁶⁹

Modern information technology is capable of breaking down barriers of information control, which could expose the growing divorce of official propaganda from reality, threatening the legitimacy of state institutions and fuelling underground dissent and activism. Therefore analysts should pay attention to defectors reporting of small pockets of underground resistance and be mindful of the increasing frequency of video, audio or writings from underground activists, as a sign that public mobilisation may not be far away.

The Institutions of the North Korean State

The institutional base is the strongest component of the North Korean state, which helps to account for its ability to withstand prolonged crises. However, state institutions are vulnerable to erosion when the central ideas and physical base are weak. They are intertwined in a necessary symbiosis in which institutions administer and exploit the physical base, under the rubric of ideas that provide the institutions with definition and purpose.⁷⁰ Kim Jong-Il has successfully preserved power thanks to the strength of social controls and his domination over the institutions that administer them.

⁶⁶ Cited in Eberstadt, 'Why Hasn't North Korea Collapsed?', p. 286.

⁶⁷ 'Perilous Journeys: The Plight of North Koreans in China and Beyond', International Crisis Group, 2006, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4469&l=1>> [Accessed 10 October 2007], pp. 7-8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p 4; 'A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger', p. 6.

⁶⁹ 'Perilous Journeys: The Plight of North Koreans in China and Beyond', p. 7-8.

⁷⁰ Buzan, pp. 82-83, 86.

PARTY, MILITARY AND COERCIVE ORGANISATIONS

Kim exercises control through two primary institutions: the KWP and the KPA.⁷¹ The party penetrates social subgroups via guidance committees, which occur at all levels of society and always feature a local cadre as a key member.⁷² The committees function as a mechanism of surveillance ensuring there is virtually no organised collective unit that is beyond the reach of the party. Kim Jong-Il has consolidated his power over the KWP by assuming leadership of the Central Committee and thus the Politburo and the Secretariat, the three key sub-units within the party. To be a high-ranking military official one must also be a party member.⁷³ Members of party and military share many of the same goals, chief of which is the security of the regime on which their own positions depend.⁷⁴ Such vertically integrated and over-lapping command and control structures are designed to minimise dissent and coup-proof the leadership.

Beneath the state's vanguard institutions lie passive and active components of the regime's coercive apparatus. Status and self-censorship comprise the passive layer of social control. The party controls career advancement, access to higher education, health care, food supplies and party membership on the basis of political reliability and family background.⁷⁵ Indeed, the prospect of career advancement works as both carrot and stick in acculturating party members into appropriate behaviour. Executing commands from above to the highest precision is good for career progression; excessive questioning and overt disloyalty are not.⁷⁶ The rewards of advancement in the party, combined with the consequences of dissent or failure produce a stifling pressure toward self-censorship and depoliticisation amongst individual party members.

Active social controls are maintained by the internal security services, who report directly to Kim Jong-Il. Internal security comes under the rubric of the Ministry of People's Security, which employs upwards of 189,000 personnel. The ministry is responsible for internal surveillance, social control, basic police duties, and border control.⁷⁷ Its most notorious constituent body is the State Safety and Security Agency, one of many internal paramilitary organisations, which is well known for the disappearance, torture and execution of political prisoners, as well as the use of collective punishment against the families and friends of transgressors.⁷⁸ Should an individual be

⁷¹ Scobell, *Kim Jong Il and North Korea*, p. 5.

⁷² Asmolov, p. 33.

⁷³ Moon and Takesada, p. 359.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁷⁵ 'Country Study - North Korea', 09 November 2005, <<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/kptoc.html>> [Accessed 03 April 2006].

⁷⁶ Buzo, p. 29.

⁷⁷ 'Country Profile: North Korea', pp. 19-20.

⁷⁸ Buzo, p. 29; 'North Korea: Human Rights Concerns', 24 November 2006, <<http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGASA240022006>> [Accessed 08 January 2007]; 'World

arrested for political crimes against the state, their entire family may be incarcerated in “re-education” camps to weed out ideological impurity and to deter others from engaging in anti-regime behaviour.⁷⁹ There are many prison camps scattered through North Korea, placed in locations chosen for their remoteness and difficult terrain.

CORRUPTION

Punishments, entry barriers and conformist pressures decrease the likelihood of rebellious individuals rising to positions of influence. On the other hand, whilst direct dissent remains unlikely, the exercise of power over priority access to state benefits provides party officials with a unique opportunity to profit from their positions. Some individual regime officials may even feel that performing corrupt acts is an indirect way, though maybe the only way available to them, of taking revenge on what they view as an illegitimate system.⁸⁰ Leslie Holmes defines corruption, in the context of communist and post-communist states, as:

Actions or non-actions—by any individual or small group of individuals occupying (an) official (party and/or state and/or legal and/or military and/or socially responsible) elective or appointed position(s)—that are perceived, by at least some criteria, to be improper and illegitimate in the particular sense of being seen as simultaneously against the collective (societal) interest and in the official's (officials') individual (self-regarding) interests.⁸¹

Legitimacy is threatened when public officials exploit their positions for personal gain and is often seen as a sign of state weakness.⁸² Once systematic corruption becomes the norm, it is extremely difficult for reformist leaders to dismantle it.

If money and self-enrichment are replacing career advancement and fear of the coercive apparatus as behavioural motivators, the institutional strength of the North Korean state may be weakening. Endemic corruption constitutes a third key leverage point for two reasons: First, it allows people to circumvent social controls by bribing state officials. North Korean defectors have testified that the level of corruption in North Korea is rampant and reaches to the highest levels of power. Many were able to escape the country by bribing state officials, including border guards and travel inspectors, to circumvent travel restrictions to reach and cross the Chinese border.⁸³

Report 2007', Human Rights Watch, 2007, <<http://www.hrw.org/wr2k7/wr2007master.pdf>> [Accessed 10 October 2007], p. 297.

⁷⁹ For an eyewitness account of North Korea's gulag system and collective punishment, see: Kang and Rigoulot.

⁸⁰ L. Holmes, *The End of Communist Power: Anti-Corruption Campaigns and Legitimation Crisis* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993), p. 160.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸² Holsti, pp. 93-94, 113-115.

⁸³ North Korean defector Ji Hae-nam recounts her use of bribes to escape the country: "I brought 200 won worth of food on top of 200 won in cash to a guard from National Border Patrol

There is even a growing suggestion that people can buy their way out of incarceration in the re-education camps.⁸⁴ Second, officials are extorting bribes from desperate citizens trying to survive during a period of food shortage and famine. Hungry people violating travel restrictions in the search for food are easy targets from whom security officials often extort bribes.⁸⁵ The legitimacy of institutional structures suffers when the citizenry can subvert the ruling structure through bribery, and when ruling officials can predate upon the population through extortion.

ABRUPT LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

The fourth key leverage point in the DPRK state is a function of its personalised and vertically integrated leadership structure. In countries where personalised leadership has grown around a single figure, augmented by a personality cult that blurs the distinction between regime and the state, the leader actively seeks to become more than a custodian to become one and the same with the state itself.⁸⁶ North Korea under Kim Il-Sung matched this description well. His rule was characterised by his patrimonial ties to key state organisations, the frequent purging of rivals and dissenters, and a personalised hands-on approach to wielding power.⁸⁷

It has often been the case that such personalised regimes collapse when the dictator dies or is removed from power, because state institutions cease to function without the direct input of the dictator. Indeed North Korea's previous leadership change was unique among totalitarian states in that Kim Jong-Il was able to assume control of the system without a messy succession struggle. This is not to say that Kim's transition to power was seamless, however, as reports suggest that there was opposition to his succession in the internal security establishment.⁸⁸ Andrew Scobell has noted that during a typical totalitarian leadership transition it is common for a

in Musan telling him that I will give him more when I come back from China after selling my merchandise. He believed me and let me pass and I arrived in China after crossing the Tuman River at 3:30 p.m. Even the soldiers are starving in North Korea that they would do anything for money and their goal is to accrue 500,000 won by the time they are dismissed from the military service." See: Ji.

⁸⁴ 'The Invisible Exodus: North Koreans in the People's Republic of China', Human Rights Watch, 2002, <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/northkorea/norkor1102.pdf>> [Accessed 19 March 2007], p. 10; Mansourov, 'Emergence of the Second Republic', p. 55.

⁸⁵ 'A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger', p. 29.

⁸⁶ Holsti, p. 105.

⁸⁷ A. Lankov, 'Korea: vchera i segodnia (The Repressive System and Political Control in North Korea)', <http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/champion/65/control_lankov.htm> [Accessed 15 May 2007]; A. Lankov, 'Kim takes control: The "great purge" in North Korea, 1956-1960', *Korean Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2002), pp. 87-119.

⁸⁸ Key figures involved included Full General Kim Yong-Ryong, First Deputy Minister of the State Security Agency, and Kwon Hui-gyong, Director of Office 35 at the KWP Central Committee in charge of South Korean Affairs. See: Mansourov, 'Emergence of the Second Republic', p. 46-7; I. Kim, 'Kim Jong Il's Military-First Politics', in Kihl and Kim (eds.), pp. 65-67.

new leader's power and influence to be limited by factors such as the successor's under-developed patronage network, the weakening of state ideology, and deterioration in the power of the coercive apparatus.⁸⁹

There appear to be two primary reasons why Kim Jong-il's succession to power was ultimately successful: first, he was groomed for the leadership for almost two decades before assuming power. During this period he developed his own power base and patronage network within the institutions of state independent of those of his father, ultimately finding expression in the Military-first Politics doctrine as his rule solidified.⁹⁰ Second, as Kim Il-Sung's son, Kim Jong-Il derived his legitimacy as rightful heir from the distinctly Confucian emphasis on the filial link to the dynastic founder.⁹¹ The strong Confucian social hierarchy allowed Kim Jong-Il to command a higher level of authority than would otherwise have been possible for a new leader elsewhere.

Kim Jong-Il has many offspring from which to choose a successor, including at least three sons and two daughters.⁹² Indications are that preparations are being made to groom an heir, but it is not yet apparent to the international community which of Kim's children is being groomed. As these candidates get older they will begin to establish their own institutional attachments and personal loyalties, which will grow into power bases and then into legitimate claims to future leadership. Alexandre Mansourov has suggested that the process of battling for "future estates" has already begun, though a clear successor has yet to emerge.⁹³ Kim Jong-Il may announce his successor at the next KWP National Convention to be held sometime during 2007-08.⁹⁴ The absence of a clear favourite may become a problem should Kim Jong-Il's leadership end suddenly, because the patronage networks of potential successors may be under-developed, and the Confucian filial link to Kim Il-Sung will have diminished in strength. In the lead-up to the previous leadership succession, Norman Levin posited four outcomes which are equally applicable to the next leadership transition, should potential successors be unready to assert control. These included a coalition government including the new leader; an agreement between the

⁸⁹ A. Scobell, 'Making Sense of North Korea: Pyongyang and Comparative Communism', *Asian Security*, vol. 1, no. 3 (2005), p. 248.

⁹⁰ D. Suh, 'The Organization and Administration of North Korean Foreign Policy', in R. Scalapino and H. Lee (eds.), *North Korea in a Regional and Global Context* (Berkeley: Center for Korean Studies, University of California-Berkeley, 1986), p. 14; B. Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1997), p. 407; Oh and Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass*, p. 4.

⁹¹ Snyder, p. 520.

⁹² R. Jensen, 'Hu Spurs Debate About Succession in North Korea', *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, vol. 5, no. 25 (2005), p. 6; B. Choi, 'Looking for Mr. X: North Korea's Successor', 10 January 2006, <<http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/2006/0603Choi.html>> [Accessed 18 April 2007].

⁹³ Mansourov, 'Emergence of the Second Republic', pp. 50-51.

⁹⁴ Choi.

Party and the military on a different successor; military dictatorship, in the absence of an agreed successor; or turmoil, including the possibility of external intervention.⁹⁵ In each case the possibilities for transformative change appear greater than would be the case under a smooth hereditary succession.

Conclusion

The physical, ideational and institutional bases of the North Korean state operate in symbiosis. Change at the leverage points in each of these dimensions is therefore likely to generate change at the others, creating a feedback loop, a perfect storm of radical transformation. If the feedback loop is activated by worsening trends at any of the leverage points, the muddle through strategy employed by the regime is likely to be unsustainable.

A reduction in the resources and income available to the regime elite—a key leverage point in the physical base—will have important consequences for the ideational and institutional foundations of the North Korean state. In the ideational base, an increased food shortage undermines *Juche* by demonstrating the incongruence of external aid dependency with an ideology of self-reliance. Similarly, an increase in the flow of information into North Korea from the outside world will create feelings of cognitive dissonance amongst those exposed to it, allowing them to give expression to long-internalised frustrations. With a basis for comparison, citizens may come to reject the official ideology. When official rhetoric and propaganda experience growing divorce from reality, the ideational paradigms of the state are eroded and its institutions lose legitimacy. The increasing frequency of reports of dissent coming out of North Korea indicate the presence of a simmering underground resentment, which could reach a tipping point and transform into mass mobilisation.

If elites come to experience food shortage as ordinary citizens have, and income streams from illicit sources dry up, the patronage networks that cement Kim Jong-il's power base may cease to command institutional loyalty. Kim may lose the allegiance of important figures if he can't maintain the privileged status of the elite. For ordinary citizens, food shortage forces them to disregard travel restrictions and other social controls in an effort to obtain food, leaving them vulnerable to extortion by corrupt regime officials. Even where extortion does not occur, officials appear willing to accept bribes to overlook breaches of social controls, undermining the integrity of the coercive apparatus. Rules, norms and ideology that become illegitimate and cannot be effectively enforced by pervasive coercion, will ultimately fall apart.

⁹⁵ N. Levin, 'North Korea's Strategic Relations', In Scalapino and Lee (eds.), p. 399.

Abrupt leadership transformation could have the most rapid and profound impact on North Korea. All three components of the state are likely to be catastrophically transformed if no clear heir emerges and the state divides into factions centred on competing successors. The physical base will be divided into cantons furnishing contestant factions, destroying current patronage networks and institutional relationships. This will shatter the ideological foundations of Kimism by disrupting the Confucian dynastic succession, and of *Juche*, by splintering the party and the military.

The muddle through paradigm has allowed the development a false sense that the Kim regime can perpetuate itself indefinitely in the face of extreme obstacles. However, a tipping point may come when the key leverage points identified in this article show concurrent and mutually-reinforcing signs of degradation, coalescing into a perfect storm in which the North Korean regime, and possibly the state itself, slides into terminal decay.

Ben Habib is a PhD student and academic tutor in international relations at Flinders University. Ben's research interests include Asian regional security, American foreign policy, energy and environmental security. He has also worked for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, taught English in China, and studied in South Korea. habi0015@flinders.edu.au.