

The Sources of Regime Stability in North Korea: Insights from Democratization Theory

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The continued presence of authoritarian rule in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) represents an outlier in the post-Cold War political histories of former Soviet bloc countries. Despite undergoing major socioeconomic distress caused by close to a decade of economic stagnation following the end of the Cold War, the death of the country's personality cult Kim Il-Sung in 1993, and heavy international pressures, the Kim Jong-Il regime has nonetheless demonstrated a capacity to sustain itself politically. Yet a systematic account of the sources of regime stability in the DPRK that engages the broader literature on democratization is at present lacking.

A comprehensive theoretical explanation is critical for several reasons. The issue of regime change has occupied one of the central themes in the policy-debate towards North Korea. On one end of the policy spectrum, hardliners argue for a policy of containment or isolation, whereas others propound a more conciliatory approach based on variants of an engagement policy. Both approaches, however, demand vital assumptions regarding domestic political stability for assessing their viability and impact. Moreover, this issue has taken on tremendous importance as a result of the DPRK's economic reforms since July 2002, which have set the country on a path of slow but unprecedented change. In order to

evaluate the potential political ramifications of the reforms, a systematic understanding of the sources of the current regime's stability is crucial.

This study will therefore focus on identifying the key variables to which the DPRK regime's survivability in the post-Cold War period can be attributed. It concludes that factors relating to North Korea's social structure, leadership strategies, regime type, and external environment have effectively obstructed the impact of some key causal forces for democratization.

The DPRK Case as an Anomaly in Democratization Theory?

At first glance, the North Korean case appears to represent an anomaly in the democratization literature of the past decade because it has successfully maintained its totalitarian polity despite undergoing many of the causal factors often associated with democratic transitions. In particular, two outstanding variables form the basis of expecting a regime collapse in the DPRK.

The first of these is economic crisis. The 1990s represented a decade of severe economic decline for North Korea. National output was reduced roughly to half over the period, coupled with food shortages that afflicted over a quarter of the population in mid-decade.¹ The single-most important proximate cause was the massive trade shock

resulting from the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern bloc in the early 1990s. As Marcus Noland points out, “the fall in imports from Russia in 1991 was equivalent to 40% of all imports, and by 1993 imports from Russia were only 10% of their 1987-90 average.”² This meant that North Korea lost access to most of the subsidized oil and coal (in addition to a third of its steel imports) for which it had come to rely almost exclusively on the USSR since the 1960s. What followed was a plummeting of the DPRK economy, which in turn led to a drastic fall in its agricultural output. Combined with such exogenous shocks, unsustainable agricultural practices implemented since the late 1980s resulted in heavy soil erosion and ultimately famine.³

The mainstream literature on democratization posits that poor economic performance raises the probability of regime collapse. There are two main causal chains through which this relationship is expected to hold. The first is through the possibility that negative economic shocks can induce a mass mobilization of protest (e.g. strikes, demonstrations, etc.) that effectively raises the cost of coercion precisely in a time when economic conditions severely limit a regime’s coercive capacity.⁴ In short, for an authoritarian regime that bases a significant portion of its legitimacy on economic

performance, an economic crisis is equivalent to a loss of legitimacy. An example is the transition case of Indonesia, in which the country’s dramatic economic downturn during the Asian financial crisis was a major cause of the end of Suharto’s dictatorship.⁵

On the other hand, economic predicaments can create tensions within the ruling elite that may increase the likelihood of reforms, coups, and other stimulants of regime change. In the particular case of highly personalistic dictatorships such as North Korea, economic crises can inhibit the distribution of benefits to supporters and allies of the dictator, whose loyalties are largely a function of personal patronage.⁶ As Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman note,

“...ECONOMIC CRISES CAN INHIBIT THE DISTRIBUTION OF BENEFITS TO SUPPORTERS AND ALLIES OF THE DICTATOR, WHOSE LOYALTIES ARE LARGELY A FUNCTION OF PERSONAL PATRONAGE.”

“economic downturns affect the loyalty of the political-military elite by reducing the ability of the government to deliver material benefits.”⁷ Such tensions have the potential to drastically alter the political landscape. Splits generated within the elite

may interact with developments from below—i.e., regime softliners can seek and find support among the masses.⁸ Moreover, new coalitions can emerge within the domain of civil-military relations, as the military may either find new allies within the government, stage a coup of its own making, or simply its withdraw support of the present regime.⁹

¹ Noland, Marcus, “Famine and Reform in North Korea,” *Institute for International Economics*, Working Paper 03-5, (July 2003): 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Haggard, Stephan and Robert R. Kaufman, “The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (April 1997): 266-269.

⁵ Uhlin, Anders, *Indonesia and the “Third Wave of Democratization: The Indonesian Pro-Democracy Movement in a Changing World”* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997): 45.

⁶ Geddes, Barbara, “What do we know about Democratization after Twenty Years?”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2 (June 1999): 139.

⁷ Haggard and Kaufman (1997), 268.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

92 *The Sources of Regime Stability in North Korea*

Korea

The second variable associated with the DPRK's collapse is the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994. As the founding father of the nation, Kim Il-Sung's near-deification had rendered him virtually immune to any opposition to his legitimacy. Over 40 years of continued autocratic rule had made his cult of personality permeate throughout the entire North Korean polity and society. In short, the late Kim's personality cult had been what defined the DPRK as a highly personalistic, neopatrimonial variant of authoritarianism, in which "the chief executive's maintenance of state authority [is] conducted through an extensive network of personal patronage rather than impersonal law."¹⁰ The sudden death of the late Kim thus mounted to a major domestic political crisis, in addition to the economic crisis that had befallen the nation.

One of the most fundamental factors that affect regime longevity for authoritarian systems is the type of non-democratic governance employed by the regime.¹¹ Although there is no universal classification scheme, most studies distinguish broadly among personalist (or sultanistic, neopatrimonial, etc.), military, and single-party forms of authoritarianism. Regime-type is distinguished in terms of the control over access to power and influence in the polity, and the relative roles that formal institutional structures and personal authority play in exercising that control.¹² In practice, differing regime types entail varying incentive structures facing key actors within the governing elite, and thereby bear critically on a given regime's capacity to sustain domestic political and economic crises.¹³

In the case of personalist authoritarian regimes, the autocrat's heavy reliance on informal (and often unstable) networks of personal patronage for political capital means that the loss of such a figure can—in the absence of a stable succession of the personality cult—lead to a political vacuum in which previously latent forms of political opposition and factionalism may emerge. Empirical evidence in the democratization literature suggests that the death of the dictator is a major cause of regime collapse in such political settings. Geddes, for example, finds that only four of the 51 personalist regimes included in her data set survived for more than a short time following the leader's death.¹⁴

Accounting for the Anomaly

In order to provide a systematic account for the DPRK regime's resilience to pressures for change, it is worthwhile to approach the issue from the structural and transactional (i.e. actor-oriented) variants of democratization theory. The task is thus to identify the presence or absence of any mediating variables—on both the societal and leadership levels—that condition the causal effects of the aforementioned factors on the likelihood of regime transition.

On the leadership level, the sources of regime durability in the DPRK can be found in the very nature of the regime itself as a highly personalist variant of authoritarian dictatorship. As noted above, economic downturns may adversely affect the distribution of material benefits; at the same time, however, the incentive structure facing

⁹ Snyder, Richard, "Explaining Transitions from Neopatrimonial Dictatorships," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 24, Issue 4 (July 1992): 383

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 379.

¹¹ Geddes (1999), 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³ Bratton Michael, and Nicholas van de Walle (1994). "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa", *World Politics*, Vol. 46 (July 1994): 462.

¹⁴ Geddes (1999): 132.

supporters of personalistic regimes renders the leadership highly resistant to internal splits. As Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle point out:

“Insiders in a patrimonial ruling coalition are unlikely to promote reform... recruited and sustained with material inducements, lacking an independent political base, and thoroughly compromised in the regime’s corruption, they are dependent on the survival of the incumbent. Insiders typically have risen through the ranks of political service and, apart from top leaders who may have invested in private capital holdings, derive livelihood principally from state or party offices. Because they face the prospect of losing all visible means of support in a political transition, they have little option but to cling to the regime, to sink or swim with it.”¹⁵

These dynamics are best illustrated using a game-theoretic approach.¹⁶ Suppose the status quo is characterized by two factions surrounding the autocrat: a majority (including Kim Jong-II, the military and other influential members of the Kim clique) and a minority faction (e.g. discontented bureaucrats, some military generals, etc.). Then, the incentive structure facing both factions is given by:

		Minority Faction	
		in power	out of power
Majority Faction	in power	10 ¹⁷ , 8	12, 0
	out of power	0, 4	0, 0

For the minority faction, the payoff is highest (8) when both factions are in power. The payoff in the upper-left cell is higher than the

lower-left cell because the minority (assuming that it desires a transition to democracy) has fewer opportunities to line their pockets and exercise influence when the majority faction is out of power. Psychological factors heavily influence the *perceived* payoffs of the minority faction. That is, the high degree of uncertainty involved in such plotting (the probability of success and getting caught, the eventual outcome of a regime transition, etc.) and the lack of trust inherent in such political settings may inhibit the occurrence of effective cooperation even within a minority clique. As for the majority faction, its payoffs are higher when the minority is out of power, since the material benefits emanating from the autocrat are not as widely shared and also because it has eliminated potential internal sources of instability from the ranks of government. In the normal state of affairs, then, the DPRK regime is expected to exhibit a high degree of regime unity (as indicated by cooperation between the majority and minority factions). As Victor Cha observes, in present-day North Korea “the elite seek only to ensure their relative share of the sparse gains that could be had from the system rather than contemplating a change of it.”¹⁸

With respect to the possible dynamics triggered by an economic crisis on regime stability, therefore, the causal effect of crisis on triggering splits within the regime is mediated by the condition that the crisis is bad enough to the extent that the minority faction’s payoff in the upper-left hand cell is equal to or lower than the expected payoff of an attempt at overthrow. In North Korea, it is presumable that this has not yet occurred.

¹⁵ Bratton and van de Walle (1994): 464.

¹⁶ The game below is an application of the payoff structure facing personalist regimes that appeared in Geddes (1999).

¹⁷ This first number represents the payoffs to the majority faction.

¹⁸ Cha, Victor, “North Korea’s Economic Reforms and Security Intentions”, Testimony for U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee 108th Congress, 2nd Session, March 2, 2004. Available online at: <http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/transition/ChaTestimony040302.html> [29 Sept. 2004].

94 *The Sources of Regime Stability in North Korea*

Korea

Besides legitimate economic channels, it is well known that the country is engaged in a host of illicit economic activities such as drug trafficking, arms sales, and private remittances from Japan.¹⁹ The international aid North Korea receives can also serve to cushion the adverse impact of poor economic performance on maintaining regime unity. Moreover, for the discontented elite, there always exists the more appealing option of defecting to another country should the status quo become unbearable. In fact, the number of defections from the country in the 1990s increased by more than three-fold compared to the previous decade.²⁰

In addition to the underlying incentive structure, Kim Jong-II's regime has exhibited durability by virtue of various leadership tactics employed following (and perhaps even before) the death of Kim Il-Sung. The most important aspect to Kim's adept management of succession politics has undoubtedly been his successful cooptation of the military as a key supporting institution of his regime. Control over the military and holding its absolute loyalty has been one of the key sources of political power in the DPRK.²¹ In a time of major uncertainty following his father's sudden death, therefore, Kim Jong-II's strategy was to consolidate his political power primarily by means of securing the military's absolute loyalty.²² In fact, when Kim formally

assumed power in 1998, he was not inaugurated as the President (which was left vacant in reverence of his father as the "Eternal President"), but as the Chairman of the National Defense Commission (a group of 10 men that includes the heads of air force, army and navy), which was designated as the highest post of the state. Furthermore, during the transitional period of 1994-1997, Kim's formal political capacity was based wholly on his standing as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, a title that he had assumed in 1991.

Indeed, there appears to be sufficient evidence that Kim Jong-II has increasingly relied on the military to govern. Marcus Noland cites a study which observes that "more than half of Kim's public appearances in 1996 and 1997 were military-related, and military figures have become increasingly prominent in the government hierarchy."²³ More recently in 2001, as Victor Cha and David Kang point out, ex-military

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officers have been assigned as directors of factories or enterprises in an attempt to convert them from military to economic elites.²⁴ This suggests the heavy influence of the military in Kim's support network.²⁵

Another notable dimension of Kim Jong-II's succession strategy has been to consolidate his legitimacy through ideology. His military-first policy, also known as the "Red Banner Spirit," introduced around

¹⁹ Hwang, Balbina, "Curtailing North Korea's Illicit Activities," *The Nautilus Institute*, DPRK Briefing Book: Terrorism, (August 2003): 4-5. Available at: <http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/terrorism/bg1679.html> [29 Sept. 2004].
²⁰ Kihl, Young-whan, "North Korea's Political Problem", *The Nautilus Institute*, NAPSnet Forum #12, 1997: 1. Available at: http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/12a_Kihl.html [29 Sept. 2004].
²¹ Kihl (1997): 4-5.
²² Kihl (1997): 5.
²³ Noland, Marcus. *Avoiding the Apocalypse* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2000), 334.
²⁴ Cha, Victor, and David Kang, *Nuclear North Korea* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 111.
²⁵ This may also be interpreted as a political move to gain support of the military for economic reforms.

1995, elevates the military—even above the Korean Workers Party (KWP)—as the most patriotic, creative, and effective institution in society most capable of realizing the *juche* ideology.²⁶ Some excerpts from a 1996 speech by Kim Jong-Il upon the 50th anniversary of Kim Il-Sung University exemplify this philosophy:

“The revolutionary army has a very important role in the building of socialism and in manning the fatherland’s defence line. Therefore, our great leader... emphasiz[ed] the great importance he attached to our armed defence forces... specifically there should be measures to guarantee rice for the military, to protect and complete the socialist structure... it is unjustifiable that we cannot supply food to our army that has been victorious for over sixty years since our great leader was an anti-Japanese freedom fighter... the responsibility for the trouble today can be blamed on the party workers... main reason for this is that party workers... are not doing their work in a revolutionary manner... All of the party workers and party organizations should learn the military revolutionary spirit and make changes in all their projects, there should be a fundamental change in their way of thinking...”²⁷

This type of ideology serves multiple functions for Kim. First, it reinforces his legitimacy as a dynastic successor by maintaining a core element of ideological continuity between the past and present. Second, it incites both a renewed sense of

revolutionary fervor and nationalism among the masses, and thereby serves the function of a coping mechanism at times of hardship.²⁸ The military-first policy also further reinforces the military’s loyalty to Kim, while at the same time consolidating his own cult of personality as both a chief national theoretician and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.²⁹ Finally, and most pragmatically, by elevating the Korean People’s Army as the supreme institution within the nation, Kim can find an adequate scapegoats for present-day ills. Another quotation from the aforementioned speech is illustrative:

“I cannot solve all the problems while I have the duty of being in charge of practical economic projects as well as the overall economy, as I have to control important sectors such as the military and the party as well... The great leader told me when he was alive never to be involved in economic projects, [to] just concentrate on the military and the party and leave economics to party functionaries. If I do delve into economics then I cannot run the party and the military effectively... The party workers should develop the correct solution to our food shortage... The anarchic situation that this shortage is now creating is to be blamed not only on the administrative and economic workers in government, but also the party workers”.³⁰

On the societal level a combination of social, historical, and cultural factors has

²⁶ Kihl (1997): 4.

²⁷ Kim, Jong Il, “On the 50th Anniversary of Kim Il-Sung University”, *Monthly Chosun*, Speech by Kim Jong-Il, (April 1997). Available at: <http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/kji-kisu.htm> [29 Sept. 2004].

²⁸ Noland (2000): 95.

²⁹ Kihl (1997): 2.

³⁰ Kim, Jong Il, “On the 50th Anniversary of Kim Il-Sung University”, *Monthly Chosun*, Speech by Kim Jong-Il, (April 1997). Available at: <http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/kji-kisu.htm> [29 Sept. 2004]

96 *The Sources of Regime Stability in North Korea*

Korea obstructed the emergence of demands for political change. Although there have reportedly been some sporadic incidents of food riots and uprisings, these were all limited to certain localities and nothing has occurred on the mass level to challenge the authority of the government. Why not?

First, North Korea's level of socioeconomic development is so low that it lacks the structural conditions necessary for an economic crisis to translate into mass uprisings. Typically cited conditions include those such as a large middle-income class, civic networks of association or any other modes of civil society, high levels of education, and urbanization. In addition, a minimum income per capita level of at least \$1000 is necessary for those conditions to take effect as incomes grow—in countries with income levels below that threshold, dictatorships are almost always stable.³¹ Though the DPRK is a relatively well-educated and urbanized country, with the literacy and urbanization rates comparable to those of South Korea as of 1992, its GDP per capita in 2002 was estimated to be around \$1000 (down from approximately \$2284 in 1990).³² Thus, under conditions of low-income levels coupled with major shortages of food, it is difficult for citizens to concern themselves of anything beyond basic daily needs. As Victor Cha points out, “[the North Korean] masses are preoccupied with basic subsistence... [and thus] the overturning of systems like North Korea occur not when things are at their absolute worst, but when they begin to get better.”³³

In addition, as Marcus Noland points out, North Korean society neither possesses nor has ever experienced institutions capable of translating mass discontent into political action.³⁴ Although limited networks of civic association exist in the country (primarily in the form of local “committees of public security,” around which much of everyday life is organized), society at large is heavily infiltrated by the state as both a means of social surveillance and indoctrination.³⁵ To ease the government's monitoring of society, since 1967 the government has imposed a three-tier classification system on the population based on their political loyalty: a ‘core’ class of about 28% of the population loyal to the KWP; an ‘unstable’ class of about 45% that include ordinary workers; and a ‘hostile’ class of about 27% that comprise of political dissidents and their families.³⁶ Moreover, the Kim Jong Il regime maintains an effective political monitoring surveillance system through two primary institutions—the secret police and public security ministry—to monitor citizens’ political behavior.³⁷

The dire socioeconomic circumstances in the DPRK also shed light on the importance of cultural factors in reinforcing the weaknesses of ‘people power’ in bringing about political change in the country. The masses’ immediate concerns of economic and physical security renders matters relating to post-materialist values (such as quality of life and political liberty) as peripheral issues in their daily lives—and such an emphasis on ‘survival values’ over values of ‘self-

³¹ Przeworski, Adam, and Fernando Limongi. “Modernization: Theories and Facts”, *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (January 1997): 13. In other words, at very low levels of income, dictatorships tend to be highly stable.

³² For detailed data, see Noland (2000): 74-78.

³³ Cha, Victor, “North Korea’s Economic Reforms and Security Intentions”, Testimony for U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee 108th Congress, 2nd Session, March 2, 2004. Available online at: <http://www.nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/transition/ChaTestimony040302.html> [29 Sept. 2004].

³⁴ Noland (2000): 334

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷ Kihl (1997): 5.

expression' has been found to be significantly tolerant of authoritarian forms of government.³⁸ Furthermore, over a quarter-century of indoctrination in the *juche* state ideology—with its emphasis on self-reliance, national pride, and perhaps most importantly, on the leadership of the “Suryong”(the leader)—has reinforced the traditional Confucian virtues of obedience to authority, social harmony and consensus over divergence, and the family, to produce a political-cultural norm of stable authoritarian governance. In light of such value systems, the political turmoil in the mid-1990s may have thus, paradoxically, served to enhance support for the succeeding regime.

In conjunction, North Koreans not only lack any historical experience with democracy, but they have experienced no other type of political rule but one that rests its legitimacy on dynastic continuation (with the exception of the Japanese occupation). At the same time, the almost total isolation of the DPRK masses from the rest of the world, combined with government propaganda's emphasis on the threats posed by “foreign imperialists,” have reinforced cultural stability by maintaining high levels of fear among the populace and dependence on the current regime. As Sue Lautze notes, the very nature of the North Korean system in which ones security is found only in trusting strong leadership supports the contention that Kim Jong-Il will be able to endure periods of famine for several more

years—as did Mao Zedong in China in the late 1950s.³⁹

The DPRK government's total regulation of the flow of information—both within the country and between its borders—along with its broader mechanisms for social control, have prevented the dissemination of discontent. Marcus Noland asserts that “the state has near perfect monopoly of mass media and completely regiments everyday life.”⁴⁰ The control over information within the country means that it is almost impossible for people of one locality to know of organized protest in areas beyond its immediate surroundings. Moreover, as a result of its national isolation, North Korean citizens lack a sense of collective ‘relative deprivation’; i.e., because they have nothing to compare their present situation other than their own history (and perhaps China), it is difficult for

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North Koreans to merely ‘imagine’ political change.⁴¹

Thus, the government, with its control over information, may find it advantageous to isolate regions and localities from each other, akin to a ‘divide-and-rule’ strategy. Hence, “starvation may be relatively localized and falling disproportionately on certain socioeconomic groups, particularly rural non-farm workers, and could reflect conscious decision-making by the political elite.”⁴²

Finally, North Korea's external environment is a key structural variable that applies to both the leadership and societal

³⁸ Inglehart, Ronald (2000). “Culture and Democracy”, in Harrison, and Huntington, ed.s, *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, (Basic Books: New York, 2000): 86.

³⁹ Lautze, Sue, “The Famine in North Korea: Humanitarian Responses in Communist Nations”, *The Feinstein International Famine Center*, Tufts University (June 1997): 10.

⁴⁰ Noland (2000): 334.

⁴¹ Based on a discussion with Dr. Dennis McNamara, Sociology Department, Georgetown University (April 13, 2004).

⁴² Noland (2000): 337

98 *The Sources of Regime Stability in North Korea*

Korea

levels of analysis. National security concerns are helping to sustain the current regime. Given the status of the Korean War as one that is held on hold through an armistice (as opposed to a peace treaty) and the presence of US troops in the South, the war is far from forgotten in the DPRK. As one prominent scholar on Korean security has pointed out, North Korea possesses legitimate security concerns.⁴³ Such concerns in turn lend an enormous amount of credibility to the radical government propaganda that preaches an “us vs. them” mentality. At the same time, for the military these concerns are translated into a heightened priority on domestic political stability, which may be a significant force driving their support for the regime.

Moreover, for varying reasons the interests of neighboring countries such as China and South Korea dictate an explicit priority of avoiding the collapse of the DPRK regime. Such interests stem from economic and geostrategic concerns regarding the tremendous costs incurred to both countries in the event of a regime breakdown.⁴⁴ Given these interests, as well as international humanitarian concerns, aid flows numbering in the hundreds of millions (approximately 1/3 as large as the DPRK’s total exports) have entered the DPRK in the form of bilateral assistance, humanitarian assistance, UN aid (mainly the World Food Program), the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), and other channels from at least 49 countries as of the late 1990s.⁴⁵ In turn, as noted above, foreign aid can be diverted for military use, used to support Kim’s patronage networks and raise hard foreign currency by, for example, selling high quality food aid for

lower quality foodstuffs on world markets.

Conclusion

Despite undergoing two powerful causal forces for democratization contemporaneously, the Kim Jong-II regime has displayed a remarkable degree of stability in the post-Cold War era. Regime stability in the DPRK has been a function of various structural and transactional variables that have mediated the causal impact of those forces on three levels of analysis: the leadership, societal, and external dimensions.

On the leadership level, a tight personalist network of political elites, combined with a set of strategies employed by Kim Jong II—of which those relating to maintaining military loyalty to the status quo seem most important—have the overall degree of regime unity, thereby insulating the current regime from pressures for change. At the societal level, poor socioeconomic conditions, as well as the state’s full-blown penetration of society through political surveillance and control over the flow of information, have obstructed the emergence of demands for political change from below. The DPRK’s traditional Confucian cultural base and ideological indoctrination in the *juche* ideology have also heavily influenced the masses’ perception of Kim Jong II’s legitimacy as a dynastic successor to the nation’s original founder. Externally, the geostrategic calculations of neighboring countries have in effect raised the threshold of economic pain needed to induce tensions within the elite, while the security environment facing the DPRK has further reinforced the military’s support for the current regime.

⁴³ Kang, David. “Rethinking North Korea”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35 No. 3 (March 1995): 253.

⁴⁴ Shambaugh, David, “China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term”, *Washington Quarterly*, Vo. 26 No.2 (Spring 2003), 44-45.

⁴⁵ See Noland (2000) for more detailed data on aid flows.

The conclusions reached in this study have significant academic as well as policy implications. For future studies on North Korea, it may be of particular interest to examine the relative importance of the variables pointed out in this paper by examining cases of both transitions and non-transitions from personalist variants of authoritarian rule. Democratization theory has yet to benefit from studies concerning negative cases (i.e. non-transition) of the independent variable, and an analysis of the DPRK case can thus help to shed more light on how authoritarian regimes are sustained. As for policy, a systematic understanding of regime stability in North Korea provides an adequate starting point from which to evaluate the potential political ramifications of the country's July 2002 economic reforms.