

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

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Each of the five papers in this collection takes its own approach to addressing the questions of what factions or potential factions exist among the North Korean elite, what information sources the elite use to learn about U.S. military initiatives, and what factors influence how outside information is perceived. It would be an exaggeration to say that the five viewpoints are as varied as the proverbial blind men's descriptions of the elephant, but readers have surely noted differences as well as consistencies among the perspectives. For example, no two of the tables of North Korean elite purport to list exactly the same thing, and consequently no two can be directly compared. The differences in emphasis and approach to understanding North Korea point to the importance for U.S. policy makers of analyzing the behaviors of foreign leaders from multiple perspectives.

### **A. WHO ARE THE NORTH KOREAN ELITE?**

North Korea's elite can be defined in any number of ways, and as the country undergoes inevitable changes in its political and economic systems, the attributes that qualify one for elite membership may be changing as well. Bermudez conceptualizes the elite as the convergence of "five broad societal groupings: Kim Jong-il's extended family and close confidants; the MPAF [Ministry of People's Armed Forces]; the KWP [Korean Workers' Party]; the cabinet; and the intelligence and internal security services," with the "pinnacle of the power-holding elite" being the members of the National Defense Commission. Gause refers to the elite as a "class," which paradoxically seems quite accurate in North Korea's supposedly "classless" society. Hassig adopts a definition that emerged from the initial discussions of the research group, defining the elite broadly as "anyone who is in a channel of communication that leads upwards [to Kim Jong-il]." Mansourov notes that party membership used to be the "entry ticket into the elite club," but that under what he terms the "new nomenclature," "access to state assets, prestige, and power, accumulation of private wealth, or government licensing authority is a must to qualify for the new elite status." Mansourov argues that the people who are closest to Kim in the information chain are three generals in the KPA Supreme Command's Operation Command Group. Smith endorses the idea that the elite consist of members of the topmost of the three political classes in North Korea - sometimes referred to in internal North Korean documents as the "core" class, but he also adds a concentric view of power: the "elite extends from Kim Jong-il's inner circle - probably no more than a half dozen to ten people - through senior military, party and government officials, the middle ranks, out to, say, schoolteachers who instruct the children of the elite."

Depending upon how the elite are defined, their paths to “elite-hood” can take somewhat different routes. Broadly speaking, political status is inherited in North Korea, much as caste is inherited in some traditional societies. The children of the elite are automatically in the elite class. In contrast, people who are born into the “wavering” political class (North Korea’s broad working class) rarely have the opportunity to attend the best schools or receive important political appointments, although by taking advantage of anomalies and changes in the quasi-socialist economic system, they may gain sufficient wealth to become members of an emerging economic elite. Economic advancement is even possible for members of the lowest, “hostile” class, although they can hardly expect to translate their wealth into political position.

The surest thing that can be said of the political elite, however they are defined, is that they have gained their positions because the Kim regime assumes they are politically trustworthy. In the case of the elite at the highest level, loyalty to Kim Jong-il is the absolute requirement. Nobody can reach the highest echelons of power without demonstrating such loyalty, nor can one remain at that level without being able to anticipate Kim’s preferences and moods and adapting to them as circumstances require.

## **B. ARE THERE FACTIONS AMONG THE ELITE?**

The consensus among the five authors is that factions - in the traditional sense of organized groups - do not exist in North Korea. There are no political groups apart from the Korean Workers’ Party. Whereas there surely are differences of opinion on policy matters, formal policy decisions are unanimous. Kim Jong-il and his fellow “elected” officials always win with 100% of the vote. Of course, North Korea is not truly monolithic in the political sense, or in any other sense. The closer one examines North Korean society, the more potential political cracks become visible. Individuals and groups - including offices, departments, and organizations throughout the North Korean bureaucracy - use what power they can muster to pursue their own interests. Nor is Kim Jong-il impervious to influence - either the broad influence of North Korean society or the more direct and powerful influence of the inner-circle elite.

Factions exist to exert political power. All the authors gave some thought to the locus and range of political power in North Korea, and all agreed that political power ultimately derives from Kim Jong-il. He giveth and he taketh away power. The Kim family has held on to power for almost 60 years by manipulating the institutions, the elite, and the masses. Kim often has been described as a mastermind at understanding people and manipulating them. He is always on his toes. He worries constantly about coup attempts, of which there appear to have been several targeted at him and his father. Through a combination of rewards (e.g., praise, lavish gifts, and

promotions) and punishments (e.g., angry criticism, demotions, and purges), Kim keeps everyone else on their toes as well. Anxiety is the price of elite membership.

Political rank as indicated by “platform ranking” on important state occasions is only a rough estimate of a person’s political power. To know more accurately how powerful someone is, it is necessary to know how closely that person works with Kim Jong-il. Bermudez makes the important point that in North Korea (as in other societies), people in staff positions supporting the high-profile elite themselves have power that derives from their affiliation with their superiors and from the information they have access to. Gause studies the informal leadership structure of the Kim Jong-il patronage system as a guide to where power lies, emphasizing in particular the importance of the first vice director level in organizations.

What is the closest thing to elite factions, if they do not exist in the strictest sense? Bermudez speaks of the five “societal groupings” mentioned above. Gause quotes defectors as painting “a rather benign picture of factionalism in North Korea”: a factionalism that is “firmly ensconced at the second echelon of the leadership and is tied to various policy initiatives.” Gause sees these factional divisions as related to different generations and different institutions, as well as to different policy initiatives. “Factionalism as it exists today is focused on garnering influence with the *Suryong*, not trying to depose him.” Gause believes that in the future “if the Kim regime loses its ability to placate the elite through goods and services, there is a real chance of the creation of factions,” citing rumored “cracks” that exist “within Kim Jong-il’s core constituency.” “This can be transformed into warlordism when the system comes under duress at the top.”

Hassig explains the consensus conclusion that “No known political divisions among the elite could fairly be called ‘factions’; that is, organized or semi-organized groups working against other groups or against the regime” by suggesting that “by the time the identity of any such group came to the attention of foreign analysts, the group would already have been exterminated.” He believes it is more accurate to speak of “divisions” or “segments” or “aggregations of the elite, not organized as formal or even informal groups, which share ideas and interests at variance with official ideology.” He characterizes as only speculative the assertions of some North Korea observers that the elite are divided on such dimensions as “hardliners versus soft-liners, military versus party personnel, members of Kim Il-sung’s different families . . . members of Kim Jong-il’s different families . . . older versus younger generation elites, technocrats versus ideologues, economy-first versus military-first policy makers, and nationalists versus internationalists, to name a few.”

Mansourov refers to the existence of factions in the days of Kim Il-sung. In contrast, the contemporary North Korean government is characterized as “a semi-privatized amorphous collection of rivaling immobile organizations and stove-piped bureaucracies that often act at cross purposes and are pressed hard and corrupted by the individual and group interests of competing clans, social and political forces vying for power, prestige, and wealth invested by the Dear Leader.” Mansourov suggests that “as the power succession struggle intensifies, the political regime tends to crack along the lines of personal loyalties and ‘estate inheritance.’” Mansourov’s principal method of describing the North Korean elite is in terms of five “power transmission belts”: “the national security establishment, the old guard, the technocrats, the local elites, and the ‘foreign wind’ [foreign affairs handlers]. Each of these groups is seen as attempting to “penetrate and influence the Kim ‘family court’ in order to ensure the representation of their corporate interests.”

Smith addresses the issue of factions by noting that “there are no independent groups in North Korean society, certainly none based on dissension among the elite. Consequently, it is more accurate to speak of divisions instead of groups, fault lines instead of fissures.” The major divisions he identifies are defined by generational differences and disparities in economic situations, “but the nature of North Korean society prevents the formation of a group consciousness, or even much substantive communication among division members.”

### **C. WHERE DO THE ELITE GET THEIR INFORMATION?**

The Terms of Reference ask about the North Korean elite’s “potential response to various initiatives related to U.S. military planning, and how they may learn about these initiatives.” In an initial meeting of the project participants, these initiatives were further described as public rather than private ones. However, most of the authors preferred to analyze information and communication channels in a broader sense.

The papers generally agreed on several points. First, Kim Jong-il and perhaps a few members of his personal secretariat have access to information from a wide range of domestic and foreign media, although what this information means to them is not always clear. Other top members of the elite probably have access to some sort of daily *Reference News*, either in print or on the intranet. Foreign radio targeted at North Korea can be received by the elite without much difficulty, although even for them, listening to foreign stations is technically illegal. Satellite television reception is restricted to only a few hotels and government offices. Foreign video and audio tapes are available on the black market, but foreign newspapers are not readily available, although the major stories they carry sometimes appear (in edited form) in the North Korean press. International telephone connections can be made through some office telephones,

although presumably all calls are monitored. Cell phones are becoming popular with the elite, although these phones are presumably also monitored. Along the Chinese border, cellular connections to Chinese transmitters are becoming popular among the elite, and are presumably not so easily monitored by North Korean authorities.

In the wrap-up workshop, the researchers engaged in lively debate over the availability in North Korea of Internet connections. Kim Jong-il is pushing an IT program for North Koreans, and many aspects of computer use are expanding. The South Koreans are providing funding, technology, and training for this purpose, and a few Internet connections (via China) permit communication directly between the two Koreas. Like long-distance telephone connections, what Internet connections exist are in the possession of organizations, not individuals, and Internet communication is likely to be closely monitored by the security organizations. Communication on the domestic intranet is expanding as rapidly as North Korea's poor computer and communication infrastructure allow, but like telephone communication, is accessible only through the workplace.

Bermudez observes that those who live in the bigger cities, especially the privileged elite who live in Pyongyang, have access to more information than those living in the countryside. He believes that within the military, only those "at the level of a general grade officer or officer within a major bureau of the General Staff Department or MPAF" have "significant" access to uncensored or foreign information, and that their support staffs presumably also have good access. Given the vertical "Kim-centric" nature of North Korea's communication channels, Bermudez says that "there is extremely little horizontal flow of information or communications except at the highest levels." He identifies three organizational channels of communication leading up to Kim Jong-il: the Korean Workers' Party, the National Defense Commission, and the cabinet. Along with a few of the other authors, Bermudez cites the restricted-distribution *Reference Information* (and *Reference News*) as sources of information available to KWP central committee members who hold the rank of department director or above, and a limited number of other KWP officials. There is some doubt about whether this publication is still being distributed, and none of the authors cites a contemporary source that says it is, although the existence of such a publication, on the intranet if not on paper, seems likely. Bermudez's paper also considers in detail military and security organizations that provide classified information to the leadership.

Gause notes that "information necessary to run the day-to-day affairs of the North Korean regime is highly compartmentalized and frequently monitored, leading to a system of half knowledge and an illusion of being informed. Those at the top of the leadership have access to more sensitive information about the regime. But, even the most senior leaders are restricted in the amount of access they can have on issues related to the security of the regime." According to

Gause, Kim Jong-il, through his personal secretary Kim Kang-chol, has a “dedicated personal apparatus to assist him in gathering information about the outside world. This apparatus is not consolidated, but spread throughout the regime, with tentacles that reach into a variety of party, state, and military institutions.” “In addition to reports prepared by their staffs, some North Korean leaders have developed some dedicated channels for additional information. This is done through personal contacts and alliances formed with one or another bureaucracy. Leaders also seek to reach accommodations with various counterintelligence organizations for both reasons of political survival and to protect private ventures, which, if discovered, could lead to allegations of corruption.” Gause identifies the primary sources of external information as MOFA intelligence from the embassies, and overseas “correspondents.”

Hassig surveys the content of North Korea’s domestic print and electronic media, which are available to all the elite. He also lists the various foreign radio sources that broadcast into the country, such as Radio Free Asia. Although the dials of North Korean radios are supposed to be fixed to the government station frequency, many North Koreans unfix these dials, putting themselves at risk of arrest; higher-level cadres apparently listen to such radios without much danger of being caught or punished. Other than official communication channels, the only secure way news can be disseminated within the country is by face-to-face contact, and according to defectors, such communication must be conducted with some discretion.

Hassig’s major emphasis is on how the elite could acquire news of U.S. military initiatives. He conducts an informal survey that demonstrates the impressive breadth of knowledge on this subject that is carried by North Korea’s two major domestic news outlets: *Nodong Sinmun* and the Korean Central Broadcasting Station. He concludes that if the North Korean elite pay attention to these channels, they are better informed about U.S. military initiatives in Asia than are most well-educated Americans.

#### **D. HOW IS FOREIGN INFORMATION PERCEIVED?**

Whatever their access to foreign information, the North Korean elite will surely perceive such information in their own unique way, and draw their own conclusions. For example, all North Koreans heard about the October 2000 visit to Pyongyang of Secretary of State Albright, but what did it mean to them? Was it seen as a gesture of peace or as a visit by a representative of a declining power to pay homage to the memory of Great Leader Kim Il-sung (whose tomb she visited)?

The interpretation of information is likely to be shaped in several ways. Bermudez speaks of a four-layered “darkly colored lens” filtering information flowing to Kim Jong-il and the top elites: “historical world view, political indoctrination, hatred for the U.S., and authoritarian

cultural rules.” Given the “strong underpinning of Confucian philosophy” in North Korean society, subordinates are loath to present any information that is at variance with what they think their superiors believe. This attitude helps explain distortions that appear to creep into communications. Bermudez describes the flow of information as “convoluted - almost Byzantine at times - as it moves through a series of paths control[led] by different and competing organizations with diverse agendas and priorities in a manner that is quite frequently redundant and inefficient.” Gause suggests two more causes of information distortion: “Information necessary to run the day-to-day affairs of the North Korean regime is highly compartmentalized and frequently monitored. This leads to a system of half knowledge and an illusion of being informed.” News to Kim Jong-il is said to be “sanitized,” with “unpleasing news glossed over.”

Hassig begins his discussion of information interpretation by introducing several communication concepts that describe how people interpret information in light of their existing knowledge, and he notes that only a highly credible source of information can change a person’s core beliefs. Years of anti-American propaganda have presumably made North Koreans highly skeptical of U.S. initiatives. The growing global anti-American sentiment, a favorite topic of the North Korean press, simply reinforces this hostility and skepticism. Hassig’s survey of news stories illustrates the negative spin that the North Korean press inevitably gives to U.S. initiatives.

The elite, who are in possession of more information than are ordinary North Korean citizens, may well experience cognitive dissonance as they try to reconcile official dogma with received news or observed fact. But the dual forces of loyalty to the Kim regime and Korean nationalism are likely to resolve many cognitive discrepancies in favor of the official North Korean line. In particular, news of U.S. initiatives that seek to overturn the North Korean status quo is likely to be viewed with disfavor by those elite who have a stake in the Kim regime. Given these problems with interpretation, Hassig believes that the issue of how to craft messages targeted at the North Korean elite is more important than the issue of what channels to put the messages in.

In his discussion of communication channels, Smith identifies three “impediments to communication”: fear of punishment, physical impediments, and cognitive impediments. The fear comes from the danger of accessing forbidden foreign news. The physical impediments derive from North Korea’s physical isolation and restricted communication infrastructure. One cognitive impediment is doubt: “some North Koreans surely harbor doubts about their system, but they have no intellectual framework in which to consider alternatives.”

## **E. INSIGHTS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS**

In these papers, and in the wrap-up workshop convened at IDA, a good first step has been made toward understanding the elite, factionalism, and communication channels in North Korea. The two major conclusions on which consensus was reached were that Kim Jong-il is the source of political power in North Korea, and that there is no evidence for the existence of factions that actively contest his leadership, although the potential for faction formation exists. Numerous lists of elite members were compiled, and some progress was made in enumerating and explaining the important channels of communication into the country and within the elite. It goes without saying that the validity of evidence about secretive North Korea should be judged on the basis of the reliability of the sources of that evidence.

The identification of factions, divisions, or segments of the elite who might respond in their own ways to news of U.S. military initiatives was the more specific focus for this project. It would be a mistake to assume that any divisions among the North Korean elite that might exist are clearly defined or stable entities, such that one party or group automatically responds to a given U.S. initiative in one way while another responds in a different way. This is no more likely to be true than to say that all Republicans respond to a given issue in one way and all Democrats respond in another. How the North Korean elite might divide depends upon the dividing issue. For example, several authors noted that potential factions might form around the issue of who succeeds Kim Jong-il. Other factions may find supporters among those who favor faster rather than slower economic reform. In other words, “All politics is local.”

Several other issues raised in these papers deserve further research. One is the question of the current level of North Korea’s technical capability, especially in the IT sector. Does the Kim regime have a national plan for technical education and development that balances the advantages of greater IT expertise with the dangers of losing informational control over the population?

In regard to the reception of information originating from the United States, do we have an adequate understanding of North Korean perceptions? For example, do we understand the meaning of their propaganda? When a North Korean government newspaper says that the people are ready to die to defend their land and their leader in the event of a U.S. invasion, should we interpret this as declaration of the strong will of the people, as a bluff, as an expression of fear or xenophobia, or as a regime ploy to rally the people or distract their attention from domestic conditions?

Speaking of Kim, whom does he consult when making key decisions? There exist many lists of reputed top North Korean elites, but these lists are of limited usefulness without fuller elaboration and analysis. What do we know about the political decision-making culture that exists in North Korea? ROK intelligence and analysis communities have produced perhaps two dozen books on this culture-specific topic, but the subject is not well understood in the U.S. policy community.

On a broader level, if the United States desires to understand how its communications affect the North Korean elite., a better understanding of how these communications are perceived is needed. When communicating to North Korea, it is also necessary to take into account how those communications sit with North Korea's neighbors. It may prove challenging to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance and other regional relationships while at the same time trying to send clear messages to North Korean elite.

