



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

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Kongdan Oh Hassig, Project Leader  
Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr.  
Kenneth E. Gause  
Ralph C. Hassig  
Alexandre Y. Mansourov  
David J. Smith

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## PREFACE

This study was conducted by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) for the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Policy). The task order, entitled “North Korean Policy Elites,” requested an analysis of the North Korean elite to support Defense Department planning. The study goals were to examine any differences that might exist among the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) elite, and to consider how different individuals, groups, or factions might respond to U.S. initiatives. The study identifies top members of the elite, discusses their personal and ideological priorities, examines their main information sources, and considers how they interpret information.

For this study, five specialists in North Korean and international security affairs were invited to contribute papers. The project director coordinated the work and hosted initial and concluding project discussions. The five papers are published here as the authors wrote them, without major editorial revisions, the better to reflect each researcher’s distinctive approach. The introduction and conclusions were written by the project leader, in collaboration with Ralph Hassig. The authors and the project leader are accountable for their respective papers, although all participants had the opportunity to review all the papers. Dr. Bruce Berkowitz, the DoD study coordinator, provided inputs throughout the study and reviewed the papers, and his prompt response to many questions and demands from the project director are much appreciated.

The project leader, who has prepared a brief field trip report on Asian views of North Korea, is indebted to her many Asian interlocutors for their ideas and suggestions. Because many of them asked that their remarks be kept off the record, in lieu of thanking them individually a collective thanks goes out to them all.

At IDA, special appreciation goes to Admiral Dennis Blair, who introduced the project to IDA and without whose support the project would not have been possible. Mr. Mike Leonard and Dr. Victor Utgoff also strongly supported the project with their administrative guidance. Dr. Brad Roberts and Dr. Caroline Ziemke acted as official reviewers and provided valuable inputs to improve the report. Ms. Eileen Doherty, SFRD editor, labored under time pressure to edit the papers, and Ms. Rebecca Kay processed the final corrections. Ms. Barbara Varvaglione, SFRD publication coordinator, saw to it that the report met its deadline.



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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT**

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To write accurately about North Korea is a daunting challenge, given the secretive nature of the country. Often even a single question, such as the key question of how North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il, makes decisions, cannot be answered satisfactorily. Fortunately, our knowledge of North Korea has improved markedly in recent years, thanks in part to the attention devoted in the United States to dealing with North Korea's nuclear program, and thanks as well to expanded inter-Korean dialogue since former president Kim Dae-jung introduced his "sunshine" engagement policy in 1998.

Understanding North Korea is difficult not only because of its secretive nature, but also because it is so very different in culture and politics from Western capitalist societies. How best to characterize North Korea remains a matter of debate, but it is fair to say that North Korean society exhibits characteristics of a traditional dynastic Confucian society, with an overlay of Stalinism. North Korea's distinctive characteristic is that the Kim family, father and son (as well as assorted family members), have ruled in this Confucian-Stalinist tradition for over half a century, running the country somewhat like the autocratic founder of a private corporation that operates without transparency or accountability.

The North Korean Elites project was sponsored by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy for the purpose of developing a better understanding of North Korea's policy elites and how they might respond to communications, media, and other signals from abroad. Such an understanding is critical for both routine relations and for crisis management, where there is a high potential for overtures and actions to be misinterpreted or confused. Under the direction of project leader Kongdan Oh Hassig, USD(P) commissioned five American researchers to write on the topics set forth in the Terms of Reference provided in Appendix A. Brief biographies of the authors may be found in Appendix B. *Asian Views of North Korea: A Field Trip Report*, is found in Appendix C.

Three core questions guided the research: "What are the factions and potential factions that exist within the North Korean leadership?" "What information sources and channels do each of these individuals and factions depend on?" "What are the contextual factors that could affect how North Korean elites receive, assimilate, and interpret information from outside sources?"

Joe Bermudez, the preeminent open-source authority on North Korea's military, begins his paper, entitled *Information and the DPRK's Military and Power-holding Elite*, by conceptualizing the military and power-holding elite as a convergence of top individuals from the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, the cabinet, intelligence and security services, the Korean Workers' Party, and Kim family members and close associates. He then describes the organization of the civilian and military bureaucracy in which the power-holding elite operate. Information access in official and unofficial channels is discussed, with special attention devoted to channels provided by security and intelligence organizations. Bermudez's paper concludes with a thoughtful discussion of some of the flaws in information reception and processing that arise from the organizational and belief structure of the Kim Jong-il regime.

The second paper, *The North Korean Leadership: System Dynamics and Fault Lines*, is by Ken Gause, a policy analyst specializing in the study of authoritarian leadership structures. Gause is particularly interested in the dynamics of North Korea's authoritarian system. He begins by looking at the organizational structure in which power is exercised, and Kim Jong-il's rise to power within that structure. He offers estimates of the relative power of members of the elite in the government, party, and military, and he also discusses the informal power structure of Kim Jong-il's patronage system. Factions in the "benign" form of institutional and generational affiliations are viewed as competing to influence Kim Jong-il, rather than contending against him. Information access is discussed in terms of internal and external information channels. Gause also includes a brief discussion of the legitimacy of the Kim regime and its system vulnerabilities.

Ralph Hassig is a social psychologist whose primary interest is in the attitudes and beliefs of the North Korean masses and elite. He largely dismisses the issue of factionalism as conjectural in nature. The title of his paper, *The Well-Informed Cadre*, presents the thesis that the North Korean elite have access to a considerable amount of information about the international community from readily available domestic news sources, supplemented by information from foreign sources. Hassig focuses specifically on how information about U.S. military initiatives is received and, with reference to research in social psychology, discusses how this information might be interpreted by the North Korean elite.

Alexandre Mansourov, a scholar and prolific writer on North Korean issues, brings the interesting viewpoint of a former Russian government official who worked and studied in North Korea. His paper, *Inside North Korea's Black Box: Reversing the Optics*, opens with a discussion of recent economic changes in North Korea. Mansourov then discusses the history of North Korean policy making, the political characteristics of the Kim Jong-il regime, and the dynamics of the ruling Kim family. The core of Mansourov's paper is a detailed description of five domestic "power transmission belts:" the security organizations, the Kim Il-sung generation,

technocrats, provincial and county political bosses, and foreign affairs handlers. In the final pages of his paper, he returns to the topic of change in North Korea, this time discussing forces for political change in the Kim Jong-il regime.

The final paper is by David Smith, a policy analyst on global security issues, whose paper is entitled *Reaching into North Korea*. Smith introduces North Korea's society, communication channels, and elite, with special reference to the society's "fault lines." Following a brief discussion of North Korea's recent foray into the IT sector, he discusses the legal and illegal activities of North Korea's diplomatic corps, who provide the relatively isolated Kim regime with a window to the outside world and a much-needed foreign currency pipeline to support Kim's personal rule. Smith's paper concludes with discussions of how to better reach the North Korean elite with communications, and how U.S. policy might influence the Kim regime.

In Appendix C Kongdan Oh Hassig has contributed a brief report on a field trip she made to assess the views of scholars, media representatives, and government officials in China, Japan, and South Korea on the project questions in the context of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

The papers are presented here in the style and structure of their respective authors, the better to highlight the distinctive approaches taken to address the subject matter. The papers served as the basis for a day-long discussion session among the authors and invited guests at IDA in March 2004. The project summary that concludes this report is based on the papers, the discussions, and the project leader's experience and interpretation of relevant evidence.

