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POWER, RELIGION, AND IDEOLOGY IN NORTH KOREA

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DISCUSSION

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YEO: Good morning and welcome to the Brookings Institution. I'm Andrew Yeo, senior fellow and the SK Korea Foundation chair at the Center for Asia Policy Studies. I'm delighted to be joined by two distinguished guests today for today's conversation on North Korea. First is Jonathan Cheng, currently the China bureau chief of the Wall Street Journal, and also the former Seoul bureau chief. He's the author of the new book, "Korean Messiah: Kim Il Sung and the Christian Roots of North Korea's Personality Cult." So I'll just air it there, even though this isn't an official book event.

And we're also joined by Dr. Jung Pak, a distinguished fellow at the Center for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy in Brussels. Dr. Pak previously served as deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia, where she was the top U.S. official on North Korea policy. And before that she held senior roles at the CIA and the National Intelligence Council. She was also my predecessor at as the Korea chair at Brookings and is author of "Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator." We're pleased to have you back here, Jung.

Now, both books are available in our bookstores, so you can check it out after the event. I am delighted to have you both here again to discuss North Korea politics and to explore questions about religion, ideology, regime, survival, and the future of the country.

Jonathan, let me just start with you first. In "Korean Messiah," you capture one of the great ironies of North Korea, a regime that officially rejects religion and punishes people for possessing a Bible. Yet it's built on an ideology that draws from it in part Christian roots. I think many Americans may not realize that Pyongyang was once a major center of Christian missionary activity in Asia. It's often called the Jerusalem of the East, as you mentioned in your book, and you know, especially in the wake of the 1907 Great Pyongyang Revival. So how did Kim Il Sung draw on elements of Christianity, its narratives, symbols, it structures to build his personality cult, even as he was actively suppressing religion and persecuting Christians inside North Korea? It's one of these great paradoxes of many, I think in North Korea, but if you would care to share with us.

CHENG: Sure. Yeah. Well, first of all, thanks for having me here. It's really an honor to share the stage with with both of you. But but I did actually draw a lot on Jung's research, her PhD dissertation from 20 years ago this year. Which really you can find it in the end notes. It's cited quite a lot there. But but yeah, that is the, a bit of the dirty secret I think of the North Korean Kim dynasty, really, here is that while it was suppressing Christianity, while it set itself up as an atheistic state, which it is, that Kim Il Sung himself was deeply steeped in the Christian church. And this wasn't something that was necessarily secret. I just called it a dirty secret but it's hiding in plain sight. He writes about it in his memoir, in fact, quite extensively.

The fact that Pyongyang was the Jerusalem of the East is not something that was kept a secret either. In fact, before Pyongyang was known at all as this place where you have Kim Il Sung Square, and you have the Kim family leader standing on top of the rostrum and watching the ICBMs and the goosestep stepping soldiers and all the rest of it, before we had this Pyongyang, Pyongyang was known, insofar as it was known at all outside of Korea, as the Jerusalem of the East, as the most Christian city in perhaps all of Asia. And so to have the leader of North Korea, the guy who founded it and ran it for 49 years that's a pretty long period of time for him to have emerged from this was, to me, just something that was mind blowing and something that needed to be explained. Especially in light of the fact that in my two trips to North Korea, it just struck me as a profoundly religious place, the way you're expected to bow before the statues and dust the portraits and wear his image over your heart, sing his praises, memorize his words, all the rest of it. It was just profoundly religious. And yet I hadn't seen anyone try to ask the question of whether Kim Il Sung's Christian upbringing had anything to do with that at all.

And so, because I'm a Wall Street Journal journalist, my thought was simply that I would do a little bit of research and maybe do an interesting weekend essay that might explain how the North Korea that we have today has these kind of counterintuitive roots in Christian missionary work from, from the US. And I pulled on one thread and I pulled on another, and I quickly realized I had more than I could fit into a Wall Street Journal article. And next thing you know, I've got 760--

YEO: It's a pretty big book.

CHENG: --768 page book. So that's how we get there. But but what I found, it just, it kept bowling me over again and again.

And even after North Korea is established as a state, that you still have North Korean sources quoting Kim Il Sung, showing off his knowledge of the Christian Scriptures in North Korean sources. That just in Nodong Sinmun, the Workers Daily, the official newspaper of North Korea, you'll see it again and again. And if I had to answer the question, spoiler alert, yes, I do think there was a connection between Kim Il Sung's Christian upbringing, and the profoundly religious society that he effectively built in North Korea.

YEO: Great. Jung, let me bring you in here now. We're in the third generation of Kim family leadership. Do you see the same degree of religious overtones in the regime's ideology today under Kim Jong Un? And more broadly beyond coercion and, you know, kind of elite management, how has the Kim dynasty, how has Kim Jong Un adapted to the ideological foundations that he inherited from his father and his grandfather to maintain control in a changing domestic and international environment?

PAK: Thank, thanks, Andrew. Great to be here with you today. And Jonathan, I devoured your book in a couple of days. Really done with such elegance, really bringing these characters, the history to life. So, thank you, it's a huge contribution to the scholarship and to our knowledge about North Korea and, and the Korean Peninsula in general and about geopolitics. And I think it really what your book actually really shows is how Christianity and the United States was that offshore balancer back in the day, where these missionaries came in and really provided that kind of ideological anchor for a lot of the reform movements of the generation of the 19th century and early 20th century. So really appreciate, congratulations, fantastic book.

Beyond, and I think, you know, for those who study international affairs and national security, iconography and ideology are hugely important for authoritarian regimes, and for North Korea, they've had to rely on ideology and iconography and to, to perpetuate the regime. In addition to, you know, elements of Christianity and some of the bureaucratic mechanisms that were used to ensure the regime stability, I think what Kim Jong Un is doing is this modern way of influencing. His daughter's an influencer. He is an influencer in the way that in addition to talking about ideology, his father and his grandfather, he's also talking about modern things like bringing his wife out back when he first came to power, in trotting out his daughter to appeal to the youth.

And what we saw in the in, when Kim Jong Un first came to power is how he was using elements that were so appealing about South Korea and about the Western world. The girl bands, the boy bands, the water parks, the amusement parks, the fashion, makeup, all of those things, are something that he introduced and made very public as soon as he came in. So his culture is very much this modern 21st century. The, his religion is this modern world that yes, North Korea can still create that world for the young people.

YEO: Would that be considered ideology, though? 'Cause I wanted to ask if ideology is really that central, or even the personality cult that Kim Il Sung built. Today, I mean, you know, there was, it was instrumental, I think in setting up the early regime, but is there, does the system still depend as heavily on beliefs, on, on this ideology. And yes, you mentioned that it's now a North Korea, North Korea wants to be seen as a more modern modern society or culture, but are there other mechanisms that are at work? And are younger North Koreans responding differently to narratives of beliefs or sort of the you know, elevating, you know, Kim Jong Un as a kind of divine leader? Is that still there? That degree of spirituality and the way they look at the leadership?

PAK: You know, it's hard to say. As you know, the defector, North Korean defector population has really plummeted since, since the pandemic hit in 2020. And its, and especially with Kim Jong Un in power, that those numbers have gone way down. I think he, I think Kim recognizes the importance of ideology. I, it, that's why he's cracked down so much since he came to power on purity, on the purity test of ideology.

But he's not willing to just stay the course with what he inherited. He's been willing to kind of knock down some of the policies that his father and grandfather had, had espoused over the decades. And so he it shows that he is reliant on ideology, hence the horseback rides up to Mount Paektu and really doubling down on the, on, on the imagery of the hagiography and reliving the past. But he's also shown over the years that he's not just bound by the past and that he's willing to create his own ideology.

YEO: Yeah, I think that's what we're seeing. We're even seeing some removal of icons or, you know, you know, even statues of Kim Jong Il, and he's actually erecting statues, his own statues, his own portraits are going up. So we are seeing the shift.

I want to take a bit of a comparative turn, Jonathan, turn to one of the themes in your book. And it's the extent to which the Kim dynasty has been mythologized. I mean, in your book you talk about this mythology and it goes down to very granular, almost absurd levels where we see that, you know, Kim Jong Un has this level of expertise and authority. I mean, in your book, I love this, where, you know how Kim Jong Un is praised for his acumen and judgment on everything from the optimal size of ping pong paddles—which I would love to know as an amateur table tennis player—to whether Winnie the Pooh is an appropriate design for children's socks—my daughter says yes to that—or to the direction of political, military, and economic affairs.

And Jung mentioned, you know, there's that photo in, was it 2016, 2017, where Kim Jong Un is on that white stallion riding up Mount Paektu, for some reason, that gives me I, I think about Putin riding a horse, too, without a shirt. It's something about riding on a horseback, that kind of mythology that's there.

But we've also seen in very different context, modern political leaders also using religious or even messianic imagery to elevate their status. And here, of course, what came to my mind is Trump's AI, President Trump's AI-generated Jesus-like figure in a white robe with glowing hands, healing a patient. You know, that's an example from American democracy. But, you know, usually when people think about, you know, comparisons of Kim Il Sung's cult of personality, Stalin, Mao, they come to mind.

But in your research, did you think at all comparatively about how leaders draw on religious symbolism to reinforce legitimacy and what makes the North Korean case distinct?

CHENG: Sure, yeah. I mean, obviously when I was writing this book, I did not know that President Trump would retweet that or whatever he did with that image of himself as a Christ figure or a doctor or whatever.

YEO: And he also actually posted an image last year of himself as the pope. I mean, he admittedly, he said that this was like a joke where I was tongue in cheek. But yes, again the image of Trump as a pope, these religious symbols and images.

CHENG: Yeah, I mean, I don't think it's a controversial statement for me to say that we do live in an age where, like it or not, there you have what I might call the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics, right? This is happening before our eyes, and it's happening in this country. It's happening in many other countries. It's happening in the country where I'm now based, China, to a certain degree as well. And so, I think it is a recognition that I think Kim Il Sung knew perhaps better than anyone else, that if you want to command loyalty, if you want command, almost fealty, almost, you know, devotion, there's no better way to do it than through the language and the iconography of religion because we know that religion is extraordinarily powerful.

One quote comes to mind. This is a quote that Sam Altman of all people made. It wasn't, it didn't originate with him, but he did post it on his personal blog. And he writes, "Successful people create companies. Very successful people create countries. The most successful people create religions." And you can interpret that however you like in the context of Open AI and that debate. But certainly I think he's onto something in a certain sense there, right? I mean, there's almost no more powerful way to to make people do what you want them to do, then to do it through the vocabulary and through the iconography of religion.

And so I'm not saying that I'm not gonna get into talking about the president here. I mean, I don't think he's a particularly you know, I don't think he's a particularly religious president. Again, I don't I don't think that's a controversial statement, but certainly I think he does understand that, again, this vocabulary is powerful.

And I don't think that anyone understood that better than Kim Il Sung, partly because he was raised himself in the church, in this Jerusalem of the East. He was steeped in the church. He didn't just go on Sunday mornings, he was, he taught Sunday school. He learned to play the organ in church. He spoke at the YMCA, he led a youth group in church, all the rest of it. He understood how powerful it can be when it's mobilized and utilized correctly.

And I don't wanna say he sort of said, I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna take what I learned in the church, I'm gonna copy and paste it. I don't know that's what he did. And I certainly couldn't prove it, but I think he just intuitively in his bones, understood how this all works.

YEO: Great.

PAK: But it, I think it also, I, it also justifies hardship. And I think it's instructive to see what drove these missionaries out to the field. For many missionaries, at least in the 19th century, they were really they're very conservative. And you know, they were seeking this, you know, there was the cultural and intellectual and political ferment of post-Civil War, they, things were being upturned, industrialization was overturn, you know, changing towns, small towns, into something that had, they had not seen before. So there was a cultural, technological, industrial revolution that that drove a lot of these missionaries forward.

But in the Korea context I think it survived and took such deep roots because of that turmoil, because of imperialism, because of being "a shrimp among whales," and being this political football among China, Japan, the United States, Russia, and that these profound changes were driving people to the church. And Kim, I think used it back in the day, and Kim Jong Un still uses it to justify hardship. The arduous march, right. Somehow there's salvation at the end, and he's the only one who can take you there. That's a very powerful message for people who are malnourished, who are, who blame themselves for not being loyal enough. So I think, you know, so those are real, really powerful ways for Kim, all of the Kims, to control these individual people.

YEO: That's a really excellent point about just the suffering that everyone goes through, and then, you know how you can, it leads to salvation. It's like, it's the narrow path. But that's a terrific point, Jung.

But I wanna now shift a little bit to you know, we've been talking about North Korean, the North Korea's regime, about autocratic politics, but I wanted to shift to foreign policy a little bit, and I wanted to turn to your latest Foreign Affairs piece. So for those that don't know, last week, Jung's article in Foreign Affairs came out, titled "How North Korea Won: The Strange Triumph of Kim Jong Un." And in there you argue that Kim has become a surprisingly effective strategic actor, able to shape the regional environment in ways that challenge U.S. interests.

And if you don't mind me, just bear with me I'm gonna read this quote from the article. "North Korea, to everyone's surprise, holds quite a few cards. Kim has proved himself to be a skillful regional player, and like his father and grandfather before him, has honed the craft of juggling, flattering, threatening, and frustrating his larger neighbors. Because North Korea's internal and external conditions have dramatically changed over the past five years, his actions now have the potential to challenge the status quo, sow confusion and undermine U.S. interests far beyond the Korean peninsula."

So, despite your assessment. North Korea doesn't seem to be at the top of the U.S. policy agenda right now. And I wanted to ask, should it be, and if so, why? Because in this article you lay out, you know, the things that North Korea might be able to sow, sow discord in the U.S.-South Korea alliance, strengthening its partnership with Russia and now China again. Should we be paying more attention to North Korea?

PAK: I think we should be paying more attention to Asia in general. And North Korea is a part of that. You know, a couple of points on the piece. I wanted to lay out, 'cause my book ended in 2019, ended the narrative in 2019, and I wanted to put a narrative on 2020 to 2025 because so much had changed since then.

One one takeaway from the article is that it's not just the U.S. that North Korea can sow confusion for and, and cause problems for and trade-offs for the United States. But it can also, has, it has more power to control its relationship with China and Russia. The biggest gift that Putin has given to Kim is his relationship, is that part, that strategic partnership, because it gives Kim more leverage over China. But because Putin also relies so much on North Korea for his war against Ukraine, it it also provides leverage. It provides Kim leverage over Putin. So it's not just the United States, it's not just South Korea or Japan, but he also has leverage over, over China and Russia, could create dilemmas for them.

And the second part is that yes, we should be paying more attention. But what I, my first point I think shows why why the U.S. and China and do need to work on the North Korea issue together. Because they do have interests. And this is something that we had worked

on during the Biden administration when I was in, when I was at the State Department, that that this is a a convergence of interest that the U.S. and China had and that we had to work together on making sure that the peace in the Indo-Pacific and Northeast Asia continued to be sustained.

And so, you know, we do need to spend more time on it, but also China needs to work on this issue. Beijing is concerned about the Russia relationship, but not enough to do anything about it. And so this is a call for, the regional powers as well as the United States to look more at this issue.

I'll also add that this is not just a Northeast Asia issue, it is a Europe issue, and it is an Africa issue and anywhere that there's potential conflict. North Korea was an was a net exporter of arms to conflict ridden states, countries, for example, in Africa. And entities in Africa really loved North Korean arms because they were cheap. And now their, the weapons are better as you can see from the way they're being used in Ukraine, against Ukraine. So, this is North Korea has huge implications for for peace and stability, not just in Northeast Asia, but also globally given its past history of proliferation.

YEO: Yeah. Well, I'm definitely gonna get back to the question about U.S.-North Korea diplomacy, just because President Trump will go, he'll travel to China next month.

But Jonathan, I wanted to ask you a question because you are the Beijing bureau chief of the Wall Street Journal, and I know I didn't, this question wasn't planned, but you've been working on this book for 12 years, so you must have talked about this book to somebody in China. Among you know, the Chinese, when you mention this background about North Korea and you know, the Christian roots, the regime, do you get any reactions from Chinese interlocutors?

And then while I have you there is, I guess so that does, that's a question more about the book, but then to Jung's point about the US, that Beijing also needs to get back into the action and think more about, about its relationship with Pyongyang and, you know, thinking about the security question, not just you know, resuming trade ties and I know that there's more. You know, railways are being built, more travel between, more flights between China and North Korea. But have you seen it, just being in Beijing, have you, does it seem like the Chinese are paying any attention to North Korea or is there any concern because of the relationship between Russia and North Korea?

So, so really two questions there. One is just reactions about the regime itself and, you know, that had these Christian roots, and the other is about Beijing, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang.

CHENG: Yeah, I mean, to answer the first question, actually, I haven't raised it. And they've never, they've not raised it. I do have a lot of dealings with the foreign ministry of the People's Republic of China, meet with them pretty regularly. If you're watching right now, I'm happy to talk about it when I come back to Beijing. But, but no, no one's actually asked me about it. Which is fine by me if they, we have plenty other things to talk about on the sort of U.S.-China file.

But yes, I mean, you know, I, to answer the second question, I don't know that China necessarily feels like it has a problem, quote unquote, with North Korea right now. We saw Wang Yi, the foreign minister of China, just head to Pyongyang. I don't know how to interpret that. I interpret that actually through the lens of one point you made there, which is that yes, the closeness with Putin, I don't think China loves it. I don't think that China is necessarily

bothered by it to the point where they are forced into some sort of a corner or need to act. But I do think that there probably was a little bit of balancing there.

And we see this not just with Kim Jong, we see it with Kim Jong Il. We saw it with Kim Il Sung. They were masterful. The North Koreans have been masterful at playing a relatively weak hand, geographically, geopolitically. I mean, their population of course being much smaller than their northern neighbors. They've been experts at navigating between Beijing and Moscow over the decades. And I think we still see that playing out today with Kim Jong Un.

So I don't know that, that China likes the closeness with which Kim and Putin are now, their bromance, if you want to call it that. But certainly in the larger scheme of things, I don't think they see it as certainly not the top tier of problems on their list right now.

Nor do I think the US, either, I mean, we obviously President Trump in his first term, North Korea was perhaps his biggest, I don't know about, certainly it was top tier for him on the global stage and we don't see that happening at all this time around. And that may be a recognition that last time around he perhaps learned how difficult a nut it was to crack and decided let's look elsewhere. I mean, certainly now we can say at the end of April 2026, he's got Venezuela, he's got Iran, he's got a lot of other things on his plate. I just don't know that he has the bandwidth or that the American public has the appetite for taking on more. And yet we also know that both Republican and Democratic administrations have been fully aware of the importance of this pivot to Asia, to use that language. And yet it never really quite happens because there are too many other things happening in too many other places.

So, I don't know that, that North Korea is going to get that sort of attention, because in part, and again this comes back to my working thesis or theory here, is that they are a nuclear state, like it or not, whether or not in this town that can be said openly or not. And that has effectively, I don't wanna say a hundred percent, but that's effectively insulated North Korea from external threats.

And this extraordinary cult of personality built on this sort of religious foundation, I would argue again, does, is not a hundred percent guarantee, but I think it does insulate itself from a lot of internal threats. Keep in mind that this is a state ideology that has not seen any reform and opening, has not seen any glasnost or perestroika, in 81 years and counting. We're into a third generation, right. After Mao, we saw Deng Xiaoping come along and repudiate a lot of it. We saw Khrushchev come along after Stalin and repudiate a lot of what Stalin had built in his cult of personality. That has not happened in North Korea at all. If anything, it has only gone more and more in, in the upward direction. So, so I kind of feel like North Korea, I don't wanna say again it's not impregnable, but I do think that Kim Jong Un, as you put in your Foreign Affairs piece, he kind of won, or he certainly, it looks like he's won at this point, right?

I mean, the future is the future, but it sure looks like he's in a pretty good spot in many ways. And so maybe that's a calculation here in Washington. I can't speak for the White House, but you gotta think that if insofar as the Trump administration's attention is turned towards Northeast Asia, it's still primarily gonna be a China thing, because that's the hegemon.

YEO: You mentioned the bromance. And again, I'm gonna get to the question about, you know, a potential Trump-Kim meeting since he's going out to Beijing, May 14th, 15th. But do you see Kim and Trump as a kindred spirit in some ways? Would they get along?

And I know Jung, you've written, you wrote about the Trump-Kim summits in 2018, 2019 in your book, in "Becoming Kim Jong Un," but do you think they would get along as Trump argues? And we've seen Trump, even last, I mean, I've actually been keeping track. My research assistant Hanna back there also has been tracking statements and they're extremely positive. I mean, he loves criticizing U.S. ally, like leadership in of Japan, Korea, you know, France, Germany, the UK, but he hasn't said, there hasn't been a single negative statement about Kim Jong Un. to the contrary, he says that we get along well, I'd like to meet him. I think he'd like to meet me. So it's been very positive. Would this work to the advantage or perhaps the detriment to US-North Korea negotiations?

I know Jung, maybe I'll, if I could ask you first?

PAK: Do they do seem to get along and there are, President Trump has dictators he likes and dictators he doesn't like. And Kim Jong Un seems to be one of those dictators that he seems to have some element of affection or respect for.

And I think I, you know, I do hope that given that there hasn't been any diplomacy with North Korea since, you know, since the pandemic, it's now been six years, that that it's important for some sort of diplomacy to start. And it would be a remarkable change if North Korea did decide to come out and engage in dialogue with the United States or with South Korea.

The regime has been clear that they don't wanna talk about nuclear issues. They wanna, they'll talk about other things. I outline in my in my article in Foreign Affairs how they might wanna talk about the Northern Limit Line and how it's not legitimate and how they might force the U.S. or South Korea to talk about it. Because you know, through gray zone activities or other activities along the, along that the disputed line.

So, I would strongly support engagement with North Korea. I'm sure that there are efforts to do so. But but I think we have to make sure that, you know, we have to manage our expectations about what that might do. But even as a first step, I think the President Trump and Kim Jong Un saying hello or exchanging niceties at the border, or as they did in 2019 would be a first, would be a good first step.

YEO: Jonathan.

CHENG: Yeah, no, I mean, I don't have a whole lot more to add. I mean, I covered those summits as a journalist, and certainly what I could see on the screen, what any of us could have seen on the screen was yes, there was a certain chemistry that was there, despite the insults that they had traded over the years, and despite their large gap in age and everything else. I mean, I think they, I think I won't be the first to say this, but I do think that, that the president president Trump does respect strength and Kim Jong Un projects strength.

And I think one thing we can say is that I think to the degree that Kim Il Sung and certainly Kim Jong Il were underestimated, and Kim Jong Un even was underestimated when he first came onto the global stage, I don't think anybody underestimates him anymore. Certainly not Donald Trump. You know, he doesn't underestimate Kim Jong Un. And I think that is actually the basis for something that, that mutual respect there, I think is actually potentially positive.

But again I think it's probably more of a bandwidth issue if we're looking at two plus years left of this presidency and there are other hotspots around the world. It's, I just wonder about that.

YEO: Sure. Let me, I'm gonna push you a little bit further and we'll probably end on this question to leave plenty of time for q and a, but what are the prospects for renewed US-North Korea diplomacy? And, you know, we've been talking about this potential Trump Kim meeting. And if talks do resume, what would be a realistic, achievable outcome? What would that actually look like from a U.S. policy perspective?

Because of course, you could criticize and say, well, we're not gonna get the denuclearization. And you know, it's just gonna be a meeting where there's gonna be nothing that really comes out of it. But if there were some kind of realistic outcome that could be made, you know, what might that be from this encounter between Trump and Kim? Whether it happens in May, I mean, I'm pretty skeptical that they'll have a meeting now in, in May, just even just from a logistical standpoint, I think. But I also think that if Kim Jong Un wants, if he wants to be recognized even as a de facto nuclear state by the United States, or if he wants to see normalization, he's more likely to get it under Trump than some future leader. And he has two and a half years to try to make that happen. So again if there is, any kind of meeting, what would be a realistic, achievable outcome? What might that look like?

PAK: How about less unachievable outcome? And I would, I would argue for something along the lines of conflict mitigation, to, you know, some sort of military to military or security to security to, you know, conversations about reducing the potential for conflict.

Again, the Northern Limit Line, reducing the potential for miscalculation, recreate some sort of military conversation or dialogue on on, you know, on risk reduction to make sure that the two sides are at least talking, so that there's no miscalculation or misplaced signals or misread signals from either side.

YEO: Jonathan, anything to add?

CHENG: Yeah, well, I mean, I'll pick up on the point that you made, Andrew, about what Kim Jong Un might want, because I think there's a parallel with, again, my current day job thinking about China and the US. Is that both Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un have longstanding asks—I don't know if ask is quite the right word—but on their wishlists would be that the U.S. would budge, at least rhetorically on this idea of de-, of the nuclear status of North Korea. Maybe certifying it would be too strong of a word, but certainly acknowledging it. And basically just admitting reality in a certain sense, right? And saying, yes, you are a nuclear state. What would that trade off need to entail? I mean. I'll let the policy folks figure that out. There's a lot that would go into that.

And of course, Xi Jinping and there's been a lot of chatter and reporting on this, including in our pages, about the Taiwan question and whether or not there may be a shift in official U.S. rhetoric around Taiwan shifting from not supporting independence of Taiwan to opposing Taiwanese independence. These are again, the sort of rhetorical nuances that we talk a lot about in Northeast Asia. And on some level it seems like an academic exercise but these things do matter a lot.

And so I think when Trump comes to the region, who knows if it will be in mid-May? I mean, I've planned my tour here so that I can make sure I'm back in Beijing before, before Trump is supposed to get there. But we know that the Strait of Hormuz has its own logic. So we'll have to see what happens there. But but yeah, I think there are a lot of expectations for when he does come to the region and what he might say to Xi Jinping across the table. And perhaps whether he does try to do something on the Kim Jong Un front, that would be fascinating, of course. But who knows.

YEO: Right. Thanks for both of your inputs. I, we deliberately left plenty of time for q and a, 'cause I know that several of you may have some questions, and if there are any questions from online as well too, maybe those can be messaged to me and I'll check my phone.

But do we have any questions from the floor? Let's see, so I'll take the, we'll start with the front, so to the left, and then Bruce, right? Yes. I guess my left. Thanks.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you for insightful session and my name is Wonchul Kim. I'm a correspondent from Hankyoreh, based in Seoul. I really enjoyed your book, "Becoming Kim Jong Un," so, how do you view the current, the "becoming Kim Ju Ae" process and do you see any risks in her succession unfolding in North Korea? And do you see any risks in her succession or in her being designated as the successor given that North Korea is very conservative in patriarchal society and she's still so young.

YEO: That could be your sequel, "Becoming Kim Ju Ae."

PAK: Thank you. Thank you for that question. And it does seem, given the daughter's appearance over the past couple of years, it does seem as if her father is creating all of the, all of the mechanisms to support her eventual succession. I think what it, one of the, one of the problems with Kim Jong Un's own succession was that it happened so, things happened so quickly and so fast. No one suspect, no one anticipated that his father would die of a stroke in late 2008. And that this and that the succession process would be so truncated. There was a lot of denigration of Kim Jong Un when he came to power. He became a four star general. No one could believe that because he didn't have any known military experience.

But I think what he is doing now with the daughter is, she's at the missile test facility. She's at the economic facilities. He is creating the history that somebody like Jonathan can write about to say she was there at the creation. She was there giving guidance to the missile control. She was there giving guidance to the agricultural specialists. Of course, you know, she, the, creating the the mythology and they would have the receipts to prove it. She, there are the pictures, there are newspaper articles. There are outside articles being written about her to show that yes, she was there at the at the creation.

I think the risks, the risks are that I think some of the, one of the reasons that previous Kims kind of held back the succession because they didn't want the elites maneuvering, jockeying, falling in line that might hamper the succession or create fissures that, that would be damaging to the successor. If he decides to change his mind, then, you know, clearly the elite are gonna start rallying behind Kim Ju Ae and making sure that they're positioning themselves and their daughters and their sons towards supporting the daughter. What happens, what would happen if, you know, he decides that maybe she's not the right person, or maybe he does decides to change his mind? Then you're gonna have to keep, you know, shift all of those elite thinking and maneuvering toward a different route. And that could create, and that could cause problems where in especially in a delicate situation as a as a succession.

YEO: Thanks. Bruce.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. For Jonathan, you pointed out that Kim Il Sung was not only a participant, but a real proponent of religious activity, and yet his regime took such harsh measures against religion. What caused that shift? Was there a trigger point for it or just a way of maintaining power?

And if I may, for Jung: tension reduction would be a very commendable objective for U.S. and North Korean diplomats to talk about or negotiate. Would that be flashy enough for Trump? I mean, he claimed that, you know, the North Korean nuclear threat was gone. We can sleep peaceably at night during his first term. Given his putting the Iran nuclear issue at the forefront of the objectives for the current activity, would tension reduction or a peace declaration be enough to, for Trump to talk with Kim, or would it resonate enough with the American electorate since there's such a big focus on the upcoming elections? Thank you.

CHENG: Yeah, sure. I guess we'll take the historical one first, but Yeah. Kim Il Sung I think he recognized the faith that he was raised in as both potential blueprint and as a potential threat. I think he saw it both ways.

And so certainly when, again I don't want to say he did it consciously or subconsciously, I simply don't know. I was not with him in the fifties and the sixties when he was doing it. He died of course in '94. I wasn't able to interview him, and even if I could, I don't know that I would get a straight answer, that I would an honest answer from him. But certainly I think he intuitively again, understood how the mechanisms of faith and religion and power work. And so I think in many ways he co-opted that, but recognized that the real thing, Christianity, as it were, by the way, also has a pretty long track record of having been used as a pretty potent political tool of power as well. And so I think he recognized that was also a potential threat.

And so, when you set up a rival faith, you need to make sure that the original isn't going to overpower yours. Especially, again, I mean, he knows how powerful Christianity can be and has been through human history. So I think there was a transition there. It's hard for me to document it and so I do try to stick to what I can show. At a certain point I will have to ask the reader, you have to, you're gonna have to make your own assessments here, because I can't show you the smoking gun where Kim says, "aha, here's how I'm gonna do it." Unfortunately he didn't leave that behind.

YEO: And on the peace declaration?

PAK: Yeah, on, I hope it doesn't happen, Bruce, but there could be a ratcheting up of tension and that would be sexy. Ratcheting up of tension, the president swoops in and there's, and you have military to military talks or some sort of talks with the U.S. that, and North Korea says, now we have peace or whatever the case may be. So that, so I think it would be flashy enough if there had been a ratcheting up of tension in the, you know, before that, which I hope does not happen.

YEO: Thanks. There is some questions. I'm gonna go to the back because the microphones are already there, so maybe we'll take two together. On the back far right. My right. Yes.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Hi, my name is Joeun Lee. I'm reporter for Voice of America's Korean Service. Thank you first for for the insights here. Questions, a couple of questions for both of you guys. It's about religious freedom in North Korea. There's a lot of like, you know, story about, you know, how North Korea is persecute religious freedom in North Korea. I mean the regime, how they persecute their religious freedom there. And then my question is, what makes the situation in North Korea in terms of religious freedom, you know, so extreme compared to other countries.

And then related to that, the second question, you know, China uses surveillance technology to crack down. North Korea, you know, you know defectors, you know, the people who practice religion. How much of this religious persecution do you think is actually, you know, being cooperated by, you know, by China.

And the last question, you know, we often talk about, you know, North Korea in terms of nuclear weapons or high level summits. How does focusing on religious freedom or human rights in North Korea, you know, change our understanding of what is actually happening to the people who are living in North Korea? Thanks.

YEO: Okay, so hold on to that for a second. And then there was another, I think near in that area. Was there another hand back there? Yes, the lady in front of the previous question, can you, and if you could state your name and affiliation.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, for sure. Hi. Thank you guys so much for coming. I really enjoyed hearing the answers to your question. My name's Deanna. I'm a student at George Washington University and I study mostly the Middle East, but I kind of wanna understand a little bit more on the broader level.

I just wanted to get some clarification on a topic that you guys were talking about, specifically the fact that North Korea hasn't really seen like direct shifts to its ideology. You mentioned like third generation, and I think that it's a common like fact that the international world in general has seen in different countries suit like a lot of intense change to like the religious presence and ideologies. 'Cause often religion, as you guys mentioned, is used for legitimizing power or for a leader to reaffirm their expansion of power. So I just wanted to get some further clarification on why specifically North Korea has not faced the changes to their ideologies that other nations may have. Like what makes North Korea so different?

YEO: Sure. So a question, a couple questions related to religious freedom and human rights, and then one about why ideology has not shifted all that much in North Korea, despite other, in other places, ideology has changed.

PAK: That's a, that's a lot there. I mean, like really excellent lines of inquiry. So, you know, religion can be used as a way to justify regimes and certain policies and to justify suffering. But they're also, and Kim Il Sung found this, they're incredibly dangerous because it's democratic. Anybody can talk about the gospel. And it's it people have to gather in small groups or large groups to be to be talking about the gospel. So it's assembly of people that are not sanctioned to be assembling. It is speech that that is highly proscribed in North Korea. It is it is thinking of a higher, a different god than your leader. And anybody can interpret who that different god is. And it's also dangerous because somebody else might be more charismatic than you.

So these religious revivals in 1907 that, Jonathan pointed out, there are lots of other potential Kim Il Sungs before Kim Il Sung who were more seasoned, who were more democratically minded, who had a lot of popular support. And so that's something that Kim Il Sung recognized was dangerous and why religion was dangerous, why freedom to assemble and freedom to believe in the things that you wanna believe in were, are so dangerous even as the other side of the coin is could be used for authoritarian darker purposes.

If we look at human rights as our policy. And I do think that we've always put human rights as a, given it short shrift, it's always kind of an addendum to not just North Korea policy, but in general has been something that's ancillary or peripheral to, it would be nice to have kind of thing versus a a policy mechanism. But I, but there, you know, I think it's, you know, human rights is never off the table. You know, we talk about it as diplomats, whether you're talking in the Middle East or you're talking in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, whether we're talking about North Korea or other things, but human rights in terms of that, that the, we

should have, that these countries should have labor laws, that the gender and the wealth disparity should not be as great.

So I think in terms of that, you know, I, given the resources that the United States has, I mean, human rights should be, we have a human rights envoy, which I think no longer exists. Or there's no one person who's doing it in the government right now. But it could be something that that could measure some, you know, elicit some benefits in the way that in 2017, North Korea gave way to some sort of disability rights, for example. So there are ways that we can, you know, use that for engagement.

YEO: Yeah, and I would also add that it's interesting that Kim Jong Un said that denuclearization is off the table. If he wants, he thinks that U.S. and North Korea can get along or that they can have engagement as long as denuclearization is not mentioned. He didn't actually mention human rights. So technically we could still be talking about human rights even in the next, if we have reengagement with North Korea.

But the question about ideology, maybe Jonathan, you can take that one.

CHENG: This was--

YEO: A student from gw. She had asked why ideology has not really changed all that much despite three generations.

I mean, I would start off by saying, because that's because they're isolated and they've blocked off the internet and all these other things. There's an information blockade. But--

CHENG: Yeah. And I would say they haven't shifted because it works. It has worked. And I think when they look at the, their near peers with Stalinist Russia and then with Maoist China, I think when they saw, I think Kim Il Sung, I mean, it is actually well documented, he was pretty appalled at both of those processes. He did not like de-Stalinization. He did not like de-Maoification. For obvious reasons, right? Because their legacies were tarnished and I think in his own mind things were working. And arguably they have, if you look at again, a third generation, perhaps a fourth generation of leadership, it is, I would contend the greatest personality cult in human history when you think about the duration of it, the intensity of it, the number of people living under it. Why would you change? I think in a certain, at a certain level. I mean, it's not great for the North Korean people, but it's great if you are in the Kim lineage. Yeah.

YEO: Can I just throw in a question that came in from online just now?

It said, because you mentioned succession, but this is a question about the sister. What role do you think Kim Jong's sister may play in the future? Is she an alternative successor to Kim's daughter, a mentor, or still likely to hold a office?

PAK: Sure. I mean, nothing that the regime does is just carefree or ad hoc. As many, there are a couple of experts in the room here. And Kim Jong Un has made sure to elevate the sister to certain roles. I mean, she was there for all the summits. She's clearly a trusted advisor. And she clearly has, and during the pandemic too, she became much more of a martial force in the in the regime. So she clearly has, is honing those those leadership. She's, she's a trusted advisor for her brother. She's part of the, she's blood family, which is really important for for the regime. And so she, you know, she, and she's older than her

niece or her, the, you know, Kim Jong Un's children. So she can play, you know, pretty powerful roles now and in the future.

YEO: Right. So Bill, I know you've been waiting patiently, so I'll call on Bill, and then I have one question that was also received from online. So, Bill, if you can raise your hands, they can give you the mic.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, thanks a lot. It's great discussion. I have maybe a difference in view of the strength of Kim Jong Un now. I think North Korea is in really deep kimchi, tell you truth. And, but I like the idea, you know, of going back to the the. 1907 revival in Pyongyang. Both of my grandparents, both of my grandparents' families were in China and Korea about that time. My grandfather taught at the Kim at the big seminary in Pyongyang. They all remarked, incredibly, and over a long period of time, over the influence of that quote, revival. It wasn't just in Pyongyang, it was all over the country. And they all speak of it in terms of, the missionaries lost control. Totally lost control. There's a big you probably have it in your book, I'm sure you would have it in your book. Haven't read your book yet. I certainly will. But they there's a big congregation and the American preacher said, okay, it's time to confess. It's a good Calvinist kind of missionaries, all about confession. And the confessions that came out were just extraordinary. Everybody just pouring out their hearts for three days. You know, saying all these incredibly bad things they'd done. It's all men, right? All these murdered, oh, you can't imagine what they was. And the missionaries just had to, no, we didn't mean that. And they really didn't mean that. But the Korean church from then on to today, especially in America, has had this tremendous confession kind of mentality, personal confession, not a Catholic confession where you go to your priest, you confess to your, to yourself and to others, all your crimes.

And I think that's pervasive. That's to me what Kim Jong Un, Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung all grappled onto this confession idea. So you talk about the meetings, the gospel one meetings, they always start with a confession. And so you immediately put the people kind of in, in a defensive mode. Right? And they can't complain about the other guy 'cause they're, first, they have to complain about themselves.

CHENG: Yeah.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: And that's gone on now for what, 70 years?

CHENG: Yeah.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: And it's so pervasive in the way they run the country through these little groups. That to me helps explain my biggest question about North Korea, is that why the people don't complain. Now, as a matter of fact, in the last three weeks since the, well, since the Iran war, prices in North Korea have done, what do any of y'all know? They've doubled.

YEO: Probably gone up a lot. Bill, because I wanna squeeze in one more question. So what is the?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Okay, just so my point is north Korea's economy is in horrific shape and y'all don't talk about it. I don't know why. . The exchange rate has gone from six, 8,000 to seven to 70,000 in a month. Yeah. I mean in two years.

YEO: Okay. So it sounded like you started out that you're saying Kim Jong Un is maybe not as strong, or the regime is not as strong as you think because of the economy.

If I could squeeze this question in from Michael Ralston, he was asking about the tug of war between state control and the Korean wave that's playing out. And similarly, after 70 plus years of unification being official policy, how is the recent change being received on the ground?

So this also relates to ideologies. You mentioned before about, you know, the K-pop, the BTS coming in. Of course, North Koreans don't want that, but how is that struggle playing out? What about you know, what are North Koreans thinking about the renunciation of unification?

Of course, Bill's question that's challenging this narrative that Kim Jong is stronger than ever. He's really consolidated his authority. Is that perhaps premature to conclude that, especially seeing what's happening with the North Korean economy?

So, we'll, I'll give you, maybe Jung if, do you wanna start us off and then just one in a minute?

PAK: Yeah.

YEO: If you could give us your responses.

PAK: Yeah. The economy, well, China has been propping up North Korea for a really long time. And the, what Beijing does not want is a, an unstable North Korea, and which is why they provided so much support during the pandemic and, and trade with China is at pre-pandemic levels. But I think when it comes to the economy and prices, Kim has made sure to consolidate power and consolidate the regime's revenue so that he takes more of what's in the pie. And so I think there there's lots of suffering in North Korea, but the people who matter and whose loyalty matters to Kim, they're still shopping, they're still going to the restaurants, they're still doing the, you know, going horseback riding and going to the amusement park. So I think there's, that as there's elite loyalty, military loyalty and fear of being cast out from that inner circle, I think would be, is a strong motivator for people to continue to support the regime.

YEO: Yeah, Jonathan.

CHENG: Yeah, and I think just to answer again, the tie together your question Bill with the complaints and why they don't complain. I do agree, I think your point there that this ritual confession every week does help in many ways in diverting some of those dissatisfactions, those grumblings. Because there's a recognition that's almost built into the psyche now, that I'm not worthy, that it's, it's my sin, it's my fault in a certain sense. So I think that certainly plays a role. I think, have we tackled most of the questions or was there anything?

YEO: It's else, it's about state, it's about the information flows, like, the Korea K-pop stuff or the unification question.

CHENG: Oh, yeah. I think the unification question to me is one of the most interesting things, because I would say other than having a daughter be the potential successor is probably the biggest deviation that we've seen in the Kim Jong Un era, the repudiation of

unification as a goal. Because to use the language of religion, that was the eschatology that Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il had for so many years. This sort of end times, how do we get to paradise in this religious society? And it would've been a unified state under the benevolence of Kim Il Sung. And now that this is not happening I read it personally as a sign that Kim Jong Un is stepping out of the shadows in a certain way.

I mean, I don't wanna say that North Korea has been frozen in amber since '94. I mean, it has been more than 30 years now. And there will be some shifts. And I don't just mean technological shifts, although those have happened as well. But at some point to have Kim Jong Un come and put his own stamp on his father and grandfather's ideology, I think is a pretty strong sign to me that he sees himself as almost an equal god with his father and grandfather.

PAK: I also think he's terrified of South Korea. And of what is going on with South Korea's dominance in the technology field, in the culture field, in the food, and the, in in consumerism and South Korean ideas. So I think he's, Kim is terrified of what that might do to the regime that has, the regime ideology that's sustained them for, you know, for three generations.

YEO: Yeah. Well on that note, Jung, Jonathan, thank you so much for being here at Brookings this morning. I, again, wanna mention that their books are available at our bookstore. I also wanted to put a plug in that at our Center for Asia Policy Studies, we have more research coming out on North Korea. At the end of, by the end of this week, we'll have some policy briefs looking at the prospects of North Korea diplomacy in the new geopolitics of Asia, and also a webinar on that same subject on May 15th.

Thank you again so much for joining us here, and if we could give a round of applause to our speakers.