

## SURYONG'S DIRECT RULE AND THE POLITICAL REGIME IN NORTH KOREA UNDER KIM JONG IL\*

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*The political system in North Korea has been characterized as a "Suryong Dominant Party-State System." Since the mid-1980s, however, its political system has displayed two interesting aspects. Formally, the broad "Suryong System" has been maintained; in practice, however, the Workers' Party of Korea, the Korean People's Army, and the government have come to acquire respectively different and considerably strengthened roles. Under this new regime, Kim Jong Il (Suryong) directly rules over the party, the government, and the military. Meanwhile, the political-ideological base, the military base, and the economic base are administered respectively by the party, the army, and the government. Interestingly, while the power of the party still overwhelms that of the military and the government, the party's means of influence has changed from giving direct orders to providing provisions or encouraging policy outlines.*

**Key words:** North Korea, Communist parties, East Asian politics

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## Introduction

The political system in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) has experienced significant changes since the death of its longstanding leader, Kim Il Sung, in 1994. No plenary meeting of the party's Central Committee (PCC), the highest leadership body of North Korea, has been held since December 1993. In addition, two significant political institutions, the presidency and the Central People's Committee (CPC), were abolished by the constitutional revision that took place in 1998. Specifically, the abolishment of the CPC weakened the consulting channel between the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and the government. These changes, in turn, reinforced the roles of the cabinet and the Korean People's Army (KPA), both previously controlled by the WPK. In other words, under the rule of Kim Jong Il, "the cabinet responsibility system" on which the administrative-economic apparatus is concentrated, is actively operating, and the "military-first politics," or *Songun* policy, has become the central theme of North Korean politics. This makes the KPA the driving force of economic development and national security.

Previous literature on the political system in North Korea has shown different findings regarding the *Suryong* (great leader) system, *Suryong's* direct rule, party-government relations and party-military relations in the eras of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Specifically, most studies are divided into two perspectives regarding the core issue of socialist political systems, party control. Some scholars argue that similar to the era of Kim Il Sung's rule, the WPK under Kim Jong Il exercises guidance and leadership over the government and the KPA. This is so even though he has bolstered the status of the KPA and the autonomy of the cabinet.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, other scholars point out that because of the

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1. Hak Soon Paik, "Dang·Jeong·Gun Gwangye" (Relations among the Party, the Military, and the Government), in Sejong Institute, ed., *The Party, the State, and the Military of North Korea* (Paju: Hanul, 2007); Seong Chang Cheong, "Kim Jong Il Sidae Bukhanui 'Seongunjeongchi' wa Dang·Gun Gwangye" ('Military-first Politics' in North Korea and Party-Military Relations during the Kim Jong-il Era), *National Strategy*, vol. 7, No. 3 (2001); Young-Tai Jeung, *Bukhanui Dang·Gun·Min Gwangyewa Cheje Anjeongseong Pyeongga* (Relations among the Party, the Military and

development of military-first politics and the cabinet responsibility system, previous relations among the party, government, and KPA have significantly changed, or at the very least, the formerly direct control the WPK once had has been weakened during the Kim Jong Il era.<sup>2</sup>

If so, why were previous studies on socialist political systems concentrated on relations between the communist party, the government, and the military? According to Schurmann's seminal study,<sup>3</sup> socialist political systems, especially the Chinese communist system in the 1960s, can be analyzed by focusing on the hierarchical structure among the Chinese Communist Party, the People's Liberation Army, and the government. That is, the power structure in socialist countries is characterized by the communist-party dominant pattern within a strict power triangle that consists of the communist party, the government, and the military.<sup>4</sup> Thus,

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the Mass, and Assessment on System Stability in North Korea) (Seoul: KINU, 2006); Daekeun Yi, *Bukhangunbuneun Wae Kutetareul Haji Anhna: Kim Jong Il Sidae Bukhanui 'Seongunjeongchi'wa Gunbuui Jeongchijeok Yeokhal* (Military-First Politics and Political Role of the KPA in the Kim Jong Il Era) (Seoul: Hanul, 2003).

2. Haruki Wada, "The Structure and Political Culture of the Kim Jong Il Regime: Its Novelty and Difficulties," in *North Korea in Transition and Policy Choices: Domestic Structure and External Relations* (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1999); Keun-sik Kim, "Kim Jong Il Sidae Bukhanui Dang·Gun·Jeong Gwangye Byeonhwa" (The Change in North Korea's Party-Government-Military Relationships in the Kim Jung-II Era), *Korean Political Science Review*, vol. 36, No. 2 (2002); Dae-Sook Suh, *Hyeondae Bukhanui Jidoja: Kim Il Sunggwa Kim Jong Il* (North Korean Leaders: Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il) (Seoul: Eulyoo, 2000); Dong Man Suh, "Bukhan Jeongchicheje Byeonhwa Gwanhan Siron" (An Introduction of Changes in Political System of North Korea), in *The Forum of Korean Politics*, ed., *Critics of Politics* (Fall-Winter, 1998); Doo-Hyeon Cha, "Bukhan Dang·Gun Gwangyeui Byeonhwaui Dongingwa Geu Uimi" (The Process of Changes in North Korea's Party-Military Relations: Dynamics and Implications), (PhD diss., Department of Political Science, Yonsei University Graduate School, 2006); Jong-Seok Lee, "1999nyeon Bukhanjeongchi Jeonmang" (Prospects of North Korean Politics in 1999), *Reports by the Forum of Reunification Strategy*, 99-1, No. 4 (Seoul: IFES, Kyungnam University, 1999).
3. Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (2nd enl. ed.: Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1968).
4. Dal-Joong Chang, "Kim Jong Il Chejewa Juchebijeon: Ideolrogi, Dang,

Schurmann's study implies that for the analysis of socialist political systems, we need to scrutinize the identity of supreme power and its relations with other actors. In this regard, North Korea is not so different from the other socialist political systems. When North Korea developed its party-state in 1945, North Korea proclaimed "the three lines of the establishment of a party, a state, and an army." Also, during the 1990s North Korea presented "the three-base theory of socialism," focusing on its political-ideological base, military base, and economic base, and "the theory of three pillars of a powerful state," which gave priority to ideology, the military, and science and technology.

However, the aim of this article is to show that the political system in North Korea is considerably different from other socialist countries. Specifically, it argues that unlike the other systems, the relations among the WPK, the government, and the KPA cannot be properly analyzed without considering the supreme power of *Suryong* over decision making in North Korea.<sup>5</sup> In other words, because of the role of *Suryong* in decision making, the WPK, the government, and the KPA do not play the roles of policy makers, but rather the roles of policy implementers. Since the hierarchy among the WPK, the government, and the KPA can vary according to the will of *Suryong*, this article analyzes the political system in North Korea by focusing on the interactions between these four players. In so doing, this article differentiates the formal relations among the WPK, the government, and the KPA from the actual relations among them.<sup>6</sup> From the perspec-

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Geurigo Gunjungeul Jungsimeuro" (Political System and Juche Ideology in the Kim Jong Il Era), in *North Korea in the Kim Jong Il Era* (Seoul: Ayeon Press, 2004), p. 43.

5. In general, socialist countries have a collective leadership system in which the politburo of the party has the supreme power over decision making. The general secretary of the secretariat of the party, as a member of the politburo, plays a powerful role. However, he does not have the same status as *Suryong* because his role is restricted to that of being only first within the politburo. Hoon Suh, "Bukhanui 'Oegyojeongchaekgye-oljeongchegy'e Daehan Yeongu" (A Study on North Korea's Foreign Policy-making Structure), *Studies of International Affairs*, vol. 7, No. 2 (2007), p. 179.
6. Seong Chang Cheong, "Joseonrodongdangui Wisanggwa Yeokhal" (The Role and Status of the KPA), in Sejong Institute, ed., *The Party, the State, and the Military of North Korea* (Paju: Hanul, 2007), p. 108.

tive of the formal and ideological relations, the political system in North Korea can be understood as a “*Suryong*-Dominant Party-State System” (SDPSS). From the perspective of actual policy implementation, the political system in North Korea can be understood as a regime of role division among the party, the military, and the government. Through this differentiation, this article finds that the SDPSS has been maintained under Kim Jong Il, but the new role division has been created simultaneously. Therefore, contrary to previous analyses of the political system in North Korea, this article shows the complicated relationships among *Suryong*, the WPK, the government, and the KPA, and thus is expected to improve understanding of the system to be more consistent with the structural changes that have occurred.

### **The *Suryong*-Dominant System and Role Division**

In general, socialist countries are constructed based on a party-state system. Under this system, the communist party has the autonomous and final authority over most policies as the vanguard of the people as a whole and the fountain of political wisdom. The communist party controls the government, the army, and working people’s organizations.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the North Korean system is also a party-state system because the North Korean constitution promulgates the party’s guidance over the government and the WPK’s rules stipulate the party’s guidance over the KPA. For example, article 11 of the North Korean constitution declares: “The DPRK shall conduct all activities under the leadership of the WPK.” In addition, article 46 of the party rules defines the role of the KPA as the WPK’s revolutionary armed forces. However, the North Korean system is significantly different from other socialist countries in that it established the “*Suryong*-Dominant Party-State System” in 1967 under which *Suryong*’s role supersedes those of

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7. Gary K. Bertsch, *Comparing Political Systems: Power and Policy in Three Worlds* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), pp. 263-65. For more detailed analysis, consult Robert K. Furtak, *The Political Systems of the Socialist States* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Book, 1986), pp. 4-12; Jan. F. Triska, ed., *Communist Party-States: Comparative and International Studies* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

the WPK, the government, and the KPA. This system is known as “*Suryong’s* Monolithic System of Guidance.” Interestingly, the theoretical support for this system was not established until North Korea began to experience political and economic crises in the mid-1980s.

The two most prominent theoretical foundations for this system are “the theory of a socio-political organism,” introduced in 1986, and “the Juche outlook on the revolution,” espoused in 1987 by Kim Jong Il himself.<sup>8</sup> The original theory of a socio-political organism in the mid-1980s consists of three entities: *Suryong* as the brain, the WPK as the blood vessel linking *Suryong* and the masses, and the public as the biological organism.<sup>9</sup> However, later theoretical development defines more concrete roles for various actors under the system of the socio-political organism. *Suryong* is the great leader of the masses and the laborers, and plays the role of uniting the people. The WPK is an autonomous nucleus of the sociopolitical organism implementing *Suryong’s* ideas and guidance.<sup>10</sup> The government is a comprehensive transmission belt, which administers the WPK’s lines and policies. The KPA, as a part of the masses,<sup>11</sup> is the armed organization that supports the three entities of the sociopolitical organism.<sup>12</sup> There-

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8. Kim Jong Il, “Juchesasang Gyoyangeseo Jegidoeneun Myeoch Gaji Munjee Daehayeo” (About the Problems on Educating Juche Ideology), (1986. 7. 15) *Selected Works of Kim Jong Il*, vol. 8 (Pyongyang: WPK Press, 1996); Kim Jong Il, “Jucheui Hyeokmyeonggwaneul Teunteunhi Seulde Daehayeo” (About the Strong Construction of Revolutionary Vision from Juche Ideology) (1987. 10. 10), *Selected Works of Kim Jong Il*, vol. 9 (Pyongyang: WPK Press, 1997).
  9. Masayuki Suzuki, “Bukhanui ‘Sahoejeongchijeok Saengmyeongche’ron” (The Theory of a Socio-Political Organism in North Korea), in Han Sik Park, ed., *Bukhanui Silsanggwae Jeonmang* (North Korea in a Changing World Order) (Seoul: Donghwa, 1991), p. 222.
  10. Hyung Won Kim, “Dangui Ryeongdoneun Hyeokmyeonggwae Geonseolui Seungrireul Wihan Gibonyoin” (The WPK’s Guidance as the Fundamental Base for Revolution and Construction), *Kulloja*, No. 8 (1986), p. 15.
  11. According to the theory of the sociopolitical organism, the military is not separate from the WPK, but it is separate from the masses. In Ok Kim, *Kim Jong Il Janggung Seongunjeongchiron* (The Theory of Military-First Politics by Kim Jong Il) (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2003), p. 87.
  12. Hyun Bae Choi, “Jucheui Gungeomseolui Gichowa Gibonhaek” (The Core and Fundamental Base of Military Construction Based on Juche

fore, the SDPSS, as part of the sociopolitical organism, is a comprehensive system, including *Suryong* as the great leader of the revolution and social construction, the WPK as the general staff of the revolution, the government as the transmission belt of the WPK and the masses, and the KPA as the WPK's revolutionary force.

More importantly, it should be noted that the other theoretical foundation for the SDPSS, "the Juche outlook on the revolution," provides the fundamental logic that makes the SDPSS conform to the "regime of role division among the party, the military, and the government." "The Juche outlook on the revolution" comprises "the outlook on *Suryong*," "the outlook on the organization," "the outlook on the masses," and "the outlook on morality." It is worth noting here that it stipulates "the outlook on the organization" rather than "the outlook on the party." Use of the term "organization" stems from two facts. First, *Suryong* and the WPK cannot be separated because *Suryong* plays a central role in the WPK. In this respect, if the phrase, "the outlook on the party," were to be used, it would logically include both "the outlook on *Suryong*" and "the outlook on the party organization." However, since "the outlook on *Suryong*" is the most important and separate part of "the Juche outlook on the revolution," the phrase "the outlook on the party" would fail to represent the proper objectives.

Second, building the separate "outlook on *Suryong*," the Juche outlook on the revolution requires consideration of the outlook on the various organizations, including party organizations and other sociopolitical organizations, all of which are controlled by *Suryong*. A reasonable solution to this problem was to construct "the outlook on the organization."<sup>13</sup> Even though party organizations are significantly different from other sociopolitical organizations in that they make up the autonomous nucleus of the sociopolitical organism implementing the *Suryong's* ideas and guidance,<sup>14</sup> differentiating the outlook on *Suryong* from the

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Ideology), *Philosophical Studies*, No. 2 (1989), p. 31.

13. It is not easy to differentiate the party from the party organizations in the North Korean political system. In general, the party is considered equivalent to the party organization given the *Suryong* system.

14. Kim Jong Il, "Jucheui Hyeokmyeongwaneul Teunteunhi Seulde Dae-

outlook on the organization in the Juche outlook on the revolution allows us to understand the supreme rule of *Suryong* over the WPK (and more precisely, the party organizations within the WPK), the government, and the KPA, as well as the role of *Suryong* in coordinating the three bodies.<sup>15</sup>

The development of the role division among the WPK, the KPA, and the government in North Korea resulted from the theoretical requirement of conformity to the SDPSS and the empirical need to overcome the political and economic crises in the 1990s. Of what did the crises consist? First, the political environment during the period reinforced the siege mentality in North Korea.<sup>16</sup> As the collapse of the socialist countries and the spread of market economies continued, the core props of North Korean development, such as military confrontation between the West and the East and hostility toward the United States, crumbled.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the North Korean economy was seriously hampered. Second, North Korea's planned economy deteriorated because of the "politicization of the economy," under which ideological orientation overwhelmed economic efficiency and led to the failure to progress in technical development.<sup>18</sup> Third, Kim Jong Il's distrust of the party cadre was another component of the crises. For example, during a secret meeting held in December 1996, Kim Jong Il strongly criticized the cadre of the PCC, saying: "The main cause of the crisis stems from the failure of the party organizations on revolutionary works."<sup>19</sup> Therefore,

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hayeo," p. 54.

15. Paik, "Dang·Jeong·Gun Gwangye," p. 35.

16. For a detailed description of the siege mentality, consult Ho Seok Han, "Choegeun Buk(joseon)ui Jeongsegwangwa Jeongse Daeunge Gwanhan Bunseok: 1997nyeon Sangbangi Rodong Simmun Bunseokeul Jungstimeuro" (An Analysis of the Recent Political Environment in North Korea), available at [www.onekorea.org/research/t18.html](http://www.onekorea.org/research/t18.html). Haruki Wada, *Yeoksaroseoui Sahoejuui* (Socialism as History) (Seoul: Changjakgwa Bipyongsa, 1994), p. 139.

17. Gavan McCormack, "Kim Country: Hard Times in North Korea," *New Left Review*, No. 198 (March-April, 1993), p. 40.

18. Janos Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 197.

19. Kim Jong Il, "Urineum Jigeum Sikryang Ttaemune Mujeongbusangtaega Doego Issda" (The Lack of Food Now Leads Us to Anarchy), *Monthly Chosun*, No. 4 (1997), pp. 308, 316.

the role division has emerged from Kim Jong Il's intention to renovate the WPK itself and address the problems resulting from the "politicization of economy" by the WPK.

### **Institutional Features of Role Division under *Suryong's* Direct Rule**

Institutional reform during the 1990s in North Korea resulted in the development of role division and the fortification of *Suryong's* direct rule. Kim Jong Il acquired the status of "*Suryong* for the 21st century" by succeeding to his father's supreme positions in the WPK, the government, and the KPA. He started to conduct direct rule over North Korean society as the general secretary of the WPK, chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC), and supreme commander of the KPA.<sup>20</sup> The development of role division among the three institutions in the 1990s was based on a historical process of institutional reform. The introduction of "military-first politics" and the "cabinet responsibility system" strengthened the roles of the KPA and the government. Also, "the three-base theory of socialism" and "the theory of three pillars of a powerful state" were proclaimed. In addition, the "Kim Il Sung constitution" was established through constitutional revision in 1998. Through these processes, the WPK, the KPA, and the government came to have their respective authority over the administration of the political-ideological base, the military base, and the economic base placed under *Suryong's* direct rule. In this regard, strengthening *Suryong's* direct rule in the 1990s can be understood as equivalent to developing the role division.

#### *The System Under Kim Il Sung*

A detailed explanation of the institutional changes between the eras of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il will help to avoid potential confusion about the role division under *Suryong's* direct rule. At first, this article differentiates the formal role of each

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20. Chul Woo Kim, *Kim Jong Il Janggunui Seongunjeongchi* (The Military-First Politics by Kim Jong Il) (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2000), p. 34.

administrative body from the operational or practical role it plays. During the era of Kim Il Sung, the formal roles of the WPK, the government, and the KPA were very similar to the current system, but the operational aspects of their roles differ significantly from those during the Kim Jong Il era. In particular, it is worth discussing two important governing bodies under the control of Kim Il Sung. One was the presidency, an institutional body filled by the president of the DPRK. By taking this position, the president represented national sovereignty, directly ruled the CPC and the Administrative Council (AC) of the CPC, and acted as both the supreme commander of the KPA and the chairman of the NDC.<sup>21</sup> The other is the CPC, the highest standing leadership body when the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) was not in session. While the CPC was also headed by the president of the DPRK, its aim was to carry out *Suryong's* guidance by controlling all three legal authorities concerning legislation, administration, and justice, as well as the military.<sup>22</sup>

With respect to the relationship between the CPC and the WPK, the personnel composition of the CPC and its relationship with the politburo of the PCC in fact show that the WPK led the CPC in the process of administering policy implementation even though the two bodies formally have separate roles. At first, because most members of the CPC were the top political elites of the WPK, the directions on how to implement policies inside the CPC depended on the WPK's initiative.<sup>23</sup> Second, the WPK's policy lines and manner of policy implementation were delivered to the CPC by a joint conference of the politburo of the PCC and the CPC. These were held frequently between 1978 and 1989,<sup>24</sup>

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21. Kim Il Sung, "Joseonminjujuuinmingonghwaguk Sahoejuuiheonbeop" (Socialist Constitution in the DPRK), *Selected Works of Kim Il Sung*, vol. 6 (Pyongyang: WPK Press, 1973), p. 383.

22. The Science and Encyclopedia Publishing House, ed., *Chosun History*, vol. 32 (Pyongyang: The Science and Encyclopedia Publishing House, 1981), p. 127.

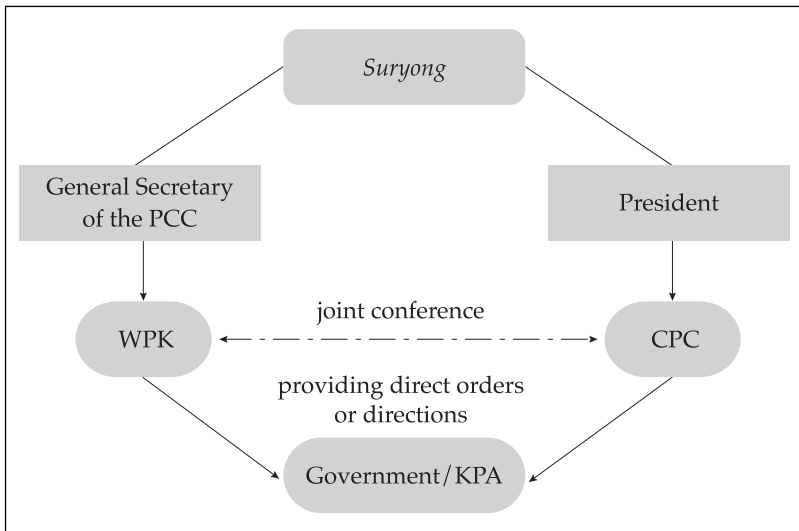
23. Chong-Sik Lee, "The 1972 Constitution and Top Communist Leaders," in Dae-Sook Suh and Chae-Jin Lee, eds., *Political Leadership in Korea* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1976), pp. 207-12.

24. Dae-Sook Suh, "Dang·Jeong Gwangye Byeonhwa" (Changes of the Party-Government Relationship), in *North Korean Politics* (Seoul: Eulyoo, 1990), pp. 274-79.

with almost one a year.

This system shows that although Kim Il Sung gave direct orders to the government and the KPA, he basically ruled North Korea through the PCC. For example, with regard to "About the DPRK's Socialist Constitution," and "About the Plans for the Economic Development of North Korea," Kim Il Sung had resolutions on them passed at the fifth session of the fifth plenary meeting of the PCC. Then he passed the first at the first session of the fifth SPA in December 1972, and the second at the second session of the fifth SPA in April 1973.<sup>25</sup> *Figure 1* illustrates the political regime during the era of Kim Il Sung. As it shows, the political regime during the Kim Il Sung era was controlled by the WPK (through the left side of the arrow). Meanwhile, the roles of the government, including the KPA, were connected to the WPK's initiatives through the joint conference between the WPK and the CPC.

*Figure 1. The Political Regime in the Kim Il Sung Era*



25. *Rodong sinmun* (Pyongyang), October 24, 1972, December 28, 1972, and April 6, 1973.

*The Kim Jong Il System*

The role division under *Suryong's* direct rule in the 1990s began to develop from the constitutional revision undertaken in 1992, through which the NDC became a more powerful body than before. The revision provided the NDC, one of the committees of the CPC during the era of Kim Il Sung, with equal or greater power than the CPC. In addition, the NDC took control of "work on the building of the people's armed forces," which the AC, directed by the CPC, had been responsible for during the Kim Il Sung era. Moreover, Kim Jong Il was appointed chairman of the NDC, "the highest military leading organ of state power," in 1993. The new regime is also based on a surprising change in an organizational aspect of the KPA. That is, while the 1972 constitution before the revision in 1992 stipulated that the president of the DPRK automatically becomes the supreme commander of the KPA, Kim Jong Il, who was not the president at the time, was appointed as the supreme commander of the KPA in December 1991.

The next step in the development of the role division under *Suryong's* direct rule was the appointment process of Kim Jong Il as the general secretary of the WPK. According to article 24 of the WPK's rules, the plenary meeting of the WPK's PCC should elect the general secretary of the PCC. However, Kim Jong Il was appointed as "the general secretary of the WPK," not as "the general secretary of the PCC," in October 1997. In addition, this appointment was made not during the plenary meeting of the PCC, but by "the WPK organizations of the KPA, provinces, ministries, national institutions and other bodies with the function of provincial party organization at party conference."<sup>26</sup> This appointment process was possible in two respects. First, there was a revision of the WPK's rules in 1982 in which the Military Commission of the PCC achieved a status equal to that of the PCC and changed its name to "the Party Central Military Commission" (PCMC). Second, it was difficult to hold the plenary meeting of the PCC and the party congress during those times. In these regards, the appointment process implies that Kim Jong Il became the general secretary of the WPK, controlling both the

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26. *Rodong sinmun*, October 9, 1997.

PCC and the PCMC.

The development of the role division was, in particular, based on the introduction of "military-first politics" and the "cabinet responsibility system." Military-first politics is defined by the political line in which military work comes first in sociopolitical decisions, which is very different from standard Marxism-Leninism in which the laborer and the farmer are the main forces for revolution.<sup>27</sup> According to this line, the KPA leads the socialist revolution and construction as the driving force of revolution, and thus the KPA administers economic development as well as national security.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, we can find the significantly increased role of the KPA in four respects. First, North Korean society is inspired by the ideas of "the revolutionary spirit of soldiers," "an army-people unity," and "the spirit of support for the army." Second, as an indirect representative of the political hierarchy, the military cadre ranks highest in ceremonies. Third, Kim Jong Il presents this emphasis on the KPA by visiting KPA barracks more often than Kim Il Sung had. Fourth, a separate chapter concerning "national security" was included in the 1992 constitution and was more specifically defined in the 1998 constitution by adding certain articles regarding the issues of "national security."

The cabinet responsibility system, replacing and reinforcing the role of the AC, represents the administrative structure in which the cabinet has centralized authority over economic issues and is responsible for the implementation of economic policies.<sup>29</sup> The previous "Tae-an Work System" institutionalized the WPK's engagement on economic issues. While the Tae-an work system still works under the cabinet responsibility system, cabinet autonomy has been greatly enhanced as the WPK's initiative on economic

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27. Jae Ho Kim, *Kim Jong Il Gangseongdaeguk Geonseoljeonryak* (Strategies of Constructing the Powerful State in the Kim Jong Il Era) (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2000), p. 26.

28. Kim, *Kim Jong Il Janggunui Seongunjeongchi*, pp. 27, 38, 43, 120.

29. Young Wha Lee, "Gyeongjee Daehan Gukgawi Jungangjipgwonjeok Tongiljeok Jidoneun Sahoejuui Gyeongjegangguk Geonseolui Geunbon Dambo" (The Consistent Control over the Economy by Centralized Authoritarian Countries as the Fundamental Basis for the Construction of Powerful Economies in Socialist Countries), *Economic Studies*, No. 3 (1999), p. 11.

issues has weakened.<sup>30</sup> First, economic business has been carried on with much more specialization as the decision-making authority of the WPK's local cadres came to be shared somewhat with the chief managers or engineers at each company.<sup>31</sup> Second, since the late 1990s, many of the economic offices of the WPK have been abolished or integrated. The institutional consequence of this reform has been the reduction of the WPK's engagement on economic issues and an increase in the cabinet's involvement. Third, as the PCC has rarely met since the abolishment of the CPC, the government has taken over official authority over economic issues. This change can be observed from the fact that the SPA became the main administrative body dealing with issues concerning the tasks of the cabinet, and "an enlarged meeting of the cabinet plenary meeting," consisting of both central and local technocrats, was held quarterly to reach decisions on economic issues.

The establishment of the role division under *Suryong's* direct rule stems from the 1998 "Kim Il Sung Constitution." The new constitution has several features worth noting. First, it abolished the previous two governing institutions, the presidency and the CPC. Second, it strengthened the roles of the NDC, the SPA presidium, and the cabinet. In particular, a new state management system was created with "the principle of military precedence" supported by the NDC.<sup>32</sup> Under this principle, the status of the NDC ascended significantly by designating it as "an organ for the general control of national defense," in addition to its previously assigned role as "the highest military leading organ of state power." Moreover, following this principle, Kim Young Nam, the president of the SPA presidium, proclaimed that the chairman of the NDC has comprehensive authority over the military, politics, and economy.<sup>33</sup>

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30. For a more detailed analysis, consult Kap-sik Kim and Moo chul Lee, "Bukhan Naegakui Gyeongjejek Yeokhalgwa Dangeonggwangye" (The Cabinet's Economic Role & Party-Government Relationship in North Korea), *Korea & World Politics*, vol. 22, No. 3 (2006).

31. Hyun Joon Chon, "Bukhan Gwonryeokgujo Byeonhwa Jenmang" (Perspectives on Power Structures in North Korea), *North Korea*, No. 410 (2006), p. 128.

32. Yi Chul Lim and Keum Ryong Choi, *Seongunjoseonui Oneul* (The Military-First Chosun Today) (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2007), p. 11.

33. *Rodong sinmun*, September 7, 1998.

The SPA presidium authority was also reinforced by providing it the duties to ratify or abrogate treaties concluded with other countries, to decide on and publish the appointment or recall of diplomatic envoys accredited to foreign countries, and to grant general amnesties or special pardons. The cabinet was expanded, taking on the roles of "administrative and executive body of the highest organ of state power" and "general state management organ." Through these processes of developing the role division, Kim Jong Il came to conduct direct rule over the WPK, the government, and the KPA as the general secretary of the WPK, the chairman of the NDC, and the supreme commander of the KPA.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the WPK, the KPA, and the government can take charge of the political-ideological base, the military base, and the economic base, respectively, when they implement relevant policies.

So far, this article has provided details of the institutional development of the role division under *Suryong's* direct rule. However, this institutional development does not guarantee that it operates as designed. Kim Jong Il's early political career may provide a simple answer to the question of why this is the case. It seems clear that Kim Jong Il controls the WPK because he and his associates have led the WPK for over forty years, since the 1960s. In addition, several examples show that the KPA is also under his control. For example, he said at a meeting with several chief executive members of the South Korean press in August 2000 that he can deliver direct orders to the KPA with respect to the establishment of direct air travel between the North and the South.<sup>35</sup> His commitment might be confirmed by North Korean literature that has frequently pointed out that the KPA is under the control of the supreme commander.<sup>36</sup>

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34. Under *Suryong's* direct rule in the era of Kim Il Sung, it was officially guaranteed that the president held another position such as the supreme commander of the KPA. However, under *Suryong's* direct rule in the era of Kim Jong Il, the presidency was abolished and the supreme commander of the KPA was appointed by an independent process. This institutional development can be seen as strengthening *Suryong's* direct rule over the KPA.

35. *Hankyoreh* (Seoul), August 14, 2000.

36. Bong Ho Kim, *Widaehan Seongunsidae* (The Era of Great Military-first Politics) (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2004), p. 94.

Kim Jong Il's political career, thus, shows that he seems to control directly the WPK and the KPA. But, how about the government? To show Kim Jong Il's direct rule over economic issues, this article focuses on the problem of who actually takes charge of the economic base and how the government is organized. At first, it is not clear in the three-base theory of socialism who is in charge of the economic base, even though the other two bases, the political-ideological and the military, are evidently assigned to the WPK and the KPA. Through the introduction of the cabinet responsibility system, the cabinet could be a candidate to deal with the economic base. But, in reality, the cabinet alone does not seem to be capable of taking on the role because most economic decisions are implemented with the help of Kim Jong Il, as the chairman of the NDC, through his field guidance. This implies that the economic base is controlled not by the cabinet itself, but by the government, including the cabinet and Kim Jong Il in his role as the chairman of the NDC.<sup>37</sup>

This direct rule of Kim Jong Il over the economic base is supported by the organizational structure of the government as prescribed by the 1998 constitution. According to the constitution, the SPA is the highest organ of state power, with supreme authority over decision making. However, in reality, it does not exercise substantial power because it is held only once a year and the meetings are limited to one or two days. Instead, most of time the NDC may have higher authority over issues regarding national defense and security, and the SPA presidium may deal with other issues.<sup>38</sup>

Kim Jong Il's words and the structure of the constitution provide the strongest evidence for the paramount role of the NDC. Kim Jong Il gave an order that issues of national defense should be dealt with first while governing authority must be divided into the issue of national defense (and security) and that of national control. Moreover, in the constitution, the NDC comes earlier than the SPA presidium. Because of the NDC's roles as the highest

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37. Keum Sil Han, "Jucheui Sahoejuuiganggukgeonseolgwa Inminjeonggwon" (Socialist Powerful State and the People's Government), *Philosophical Studies*, No. 3 (1999), pp. 15-17.

38. Suh, "Bukhanui 'Oegyojeongchaekgyeoljeongchegy'e Daehan Yeongu," pp. 173-74.

standing leadership and administrative body, it can give orders to the military departments as well as to most other institutions concerning the economic base in North Korea.<sup>39</sup> These roles of the NDC imply that Kim Jong Il, working as the chairman of the NDC, controls the government with the cabinet as an affiliated institution and thus directly rules the economic base.

*Figure 2* illustrates the structure of role division under Kim Jong Il's direct rule. As it shows, the abolishment of the CPC by the constitutional revision in 1998 implies that the WPK's power is weakened to some extent, which results in the development of a much more independent relationship between the WPK, the government, and the KPA. This institutional reform strengthened *Suryong's* direct rule over the WPK, the government, and the KPA, and solidified the role divisions among the three bodies. However, while the power of the WPK still overwhelms that of the KPA and the government because of the maintenance of the SDPSS, the role orientation of the WPK puts more emphasis on suggesting or encouraging general policy than was previously the case, when orders or directions were provided more directly. For example, the WPK focuses on economic development and social construction rather than on ideology and revolution as before. Also, the main focus has shifted from "the politicization of the economy" to "the economization of politics."<sup>40</sup>

Regarding the relationship between the government and the KPA, *Figure 2* also shows that both organs developed a very close interaction by providing mutual aid even though they have their own independent roles regarding their respective bases. In addition, since Kim Jong Il occupies the supreme position in both organs, he rules them directly. When the government tries to help the KPA, it mobilizes the cabinet and the masses by order of the NDC. When the KPA tries to support the

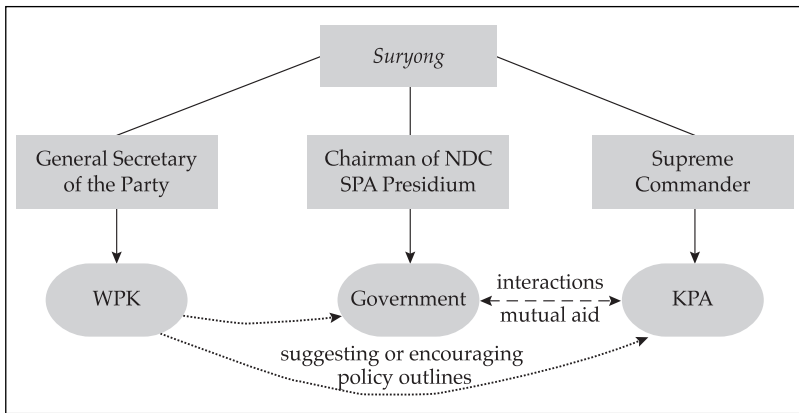
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39. Hyun Chul Oh, *Seongungwa Minjokui Unmyeong* (The Fate of the Military-first Politics and the Nation) (Pyongyang: Pyongyang Press, 2007), pp. 139-43.

40. Richard Lowenthal, "Development vs. Utopia in Communist Politics," in Chalmers Johnson, ed., *Change in Communist Systems* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 50; Keun-sik Kim, "1990nyeondae Bukhanui Jibangeongch" (North Korea's Local Politics in the 1990s: Continuity and Change of Juche Socialism), *Unification Policy Studies*, vol. 13, No. 2 (2004), p. 184.

economic work of the government, it calls for the KPA by order of the supreme commander. Representative examples of the order of the supreme commander would be “the order of urging the quick construction of the power plant at Mt. Kumkang in January 1995” and “the order of asking the KPA to take responsibility for cultivating the soil in April 1997.” Also, representative of the orders of the NDC would be “the order of fortifying the rear areas by constructing a shelter for residents in April 1999” and “the order of encouraging the construction of a large-scale hydropower plant by mobilizing the WPK, the KPA, and the masses as a whole in January 1999.”<sup>41</sup>

Figure 2. The Political Regime in the Kim Jong Il Era



So far, this article has covered the institutional and operational features of the role division under *Suryong's* direct rule. One interesting remaining issue is why the WPK comes before the KPA and the government in the institutional hierarchy. In fact, the hierarchical order represents the relative importance among them in the political system of North Korea. In North Korea, the WPK is regarded as playing an inevitable role as the institutional apparatus for internal integration. In addition, the WPK's construction of political and ideological bases is considered to be central regarding

41. Jae Hong Ko, *Bukhangun Choegosaryeonggwon Wisang Yeongu* (A Study of the Supreme Commander in the KPA) (Seoul: KINU, 2006), pp. 67-71.

core national interests such as the survival of the socialist country. In this regard, the WPK stands first in the regime's hierarchy. Meanwhile, the KPA is located on the second tier because North Korea considers security issues more important than economic ones and emphasizes the army-first ideology.

### **Potential Changes in the North Korean Political System**

Expectations concerning the future of the North Korean political system require consideration of changes in the political and economic environments, and Kim Jong Il's personal will in *Suryong* system.<sup>42</sup> The role division under *Suryong's* direct rule has been established in response to the political-economic crises during the Kim Jong Il era. The current development of the regime shows that the government and the KPA strengthened their roles based on the "cabinet responsibility system" and "military-first politics." In addition, the WPK's previously strong initiative was weakened even though the WPK still leads North Korean society.

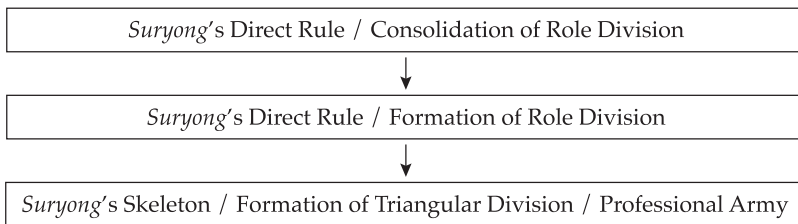
Based on the current development of the role division, the author expects that the future direction of institutional reform may take place in three steps (see *Figure 3* below). The first step would be to consolidate the current regime by clarifying and reinforcing the role division between the WPK and the government. This consolidation of the role division depends on the extent to which the future institutional development removes

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42. Two plausible ways change in the North Korean political system might occur would be a catastrophic event resulting from a political-economic crisis or a gradual soft landing. If the first were to happen, it is not easy to predict the future of the North Korean political system. The resulting regime might be totally new, with many new actors and interactions between them that would have little connection to the current system. In this regard, the author will refrain from making predictions regarding the second case, assuming that the North Korean political system will not change abruptly as long as Kim Jong Il is alive. For more detailed analysis, consult Kap-sik Kim, "Bukhan jeongchichegejeui byeonhwa: teukjinggwa hanggye geurigo jenmang" (Shifts in North Korean Political System: Features and Expectations), *North Korean Studies Review*, vol. 19, No. 3 (2007).

the current remaining roles of the WPK on economic issues. In this regard, it is urgent that North Korean technocrats should show their capacity to deal with current economic problems and thus create a consensus on the future direction of institutional reform from among the other political elites.

Figure 3. A Theoretical Expectation of the Transitional Paths for the North Korean Regime



The second step, given the consolidation of the role division, would weaken the excessive influence of the KPA and military-first politics. This would be possible through the improvement of both inter-Korean relations and DPRK-U.S. relations. If these changes occur, the role division could be replaced by one in which economic issues would be considered more important than military issues. Even in such a case, however, Kim Jong Il's direct rule would probably continue because Kim prefers to rule through his associates rather than through the official governing institutions.<sup>43</sup>

The final step expected to develop is the emergence of a triangular regime consisting of the party, the government, and the people's congress, similar to the regime structure in China. Under this regime, the author would expect four institutional features. First, the role of the WPK would be completely separate from the government. Second, the SPA would be able to gain substantial power independent of *Suryong* and the government. Third, the principle of checks and balances among the WPK, the government, and the SPA would work properly. Thus, political elites in the government would take responsibility for the personnel of the

43. Jinwook Choi, *Kim Jong Il Jeonggwongwa Hanbando Jangrae* (Kim Jong Il's Regime and the Future of Korean Peninsula) (Seoul: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Press, 2005), p. 88.

WPK and the SPA.<sup>44</sup> Fourth, the KPA would not function as a main revolutionary force, but as a professional army.

Despite this theoretical three-step expectation, it is hard to predict whether or not it might be realized in the near future. One plausible answer could be derived from the consideration of political incentives of relevant actors in response to developments. The first and second steps seem to be easily achievable relative to the third step. Because the first and second stages of development do not change the power structure of North Korea, they would be possible depending on Kim Jong Il's own will and favorable international political and economic environments. On the other hand, because the third step would, in fact, have an influence on the political status of Kim Jong Il and the KPA, it seems highly unlikely since neither of them has any incentive to accept such changes. If Kim Jong Il agrees to move toward the third step, it in fact means the skeletonization of the *Suryong* system. In conclusion, although certain changes in the future North Korean regime can be expected, how far the North Korean society can go depends on the political will of and incentives for Kim Jong Il and his military associates.

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44. Hyung Jung Park, *Bukhanui Gaehyeokgaebanggwae Chejebyeonhwa* (Political Reform and Openness and Systemic Changes in North Korea) (Seoul: Haenam, 2004), p. 211.

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