Crisis in the Leadership of Kim Jong Un:
Focused on the Unitary Leadership System

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Summary

Unlike when Kim Jong Il was officially nominated and recognized as successor, Kim Jong Un underwent a relatively short period of succession training. The advent of Kim Jong Un as successor was very different from that of Kim Jong Il's. First, the late Kim Jong Il passed through the selection process of successor through the official party convention after the 1970s. By contrast, the rise of Kim Jong Un as successor was Kim Jong Il's personal choice by designating Kim Jong Un as his successor in January 2009. Second, Kim Jong Il had gone through the stable period of about 20 years for power transfer, but Kim Jong Un did not have enough of time, having only less than three years, to adapt himself to unitary leadership system. Kim Jong Un has thus two weaknesses in his grip on power. One is the vulnerability inherent in his power due to failing to establish his own unitary leadership system as the heir, and the other is the problem of divisions within the North Korean elite, which diverged over economic interests after 2009. So, on the surface, the Kim Jong Un regime seems to be stabilizing, but he still has to inevitably lean on the revolutionary achievements of former leaders, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, rather than presenting a new goal of the revolutionary cause in his era.

Keywords: unitary leadership, personal leadership, institutional leadership, Kim Jong Un, third hereditary succession, Kimilsung-Kimjongilism, Kim Jong Il's Patriotism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Coming into power for three years, the year 2014 is crucial for Kim Jong Un because it will be the year to determine the future of his regime. Young and inexperienced, the North Korean successor’s suitability has constantly been the subject of skepticism since September 28, 2010 when he was officially nominated as sole heir of the former leader the late Kim Jong Il at the third Workers’ Party Representatives’ Meeting. Now is about the time for the young leader to be tested whether such judgment on his leadership was justified.

Unlike when Kim Jong Il was officially nominated and recognized as successor, Kim Jong Un underwent a relatively short period of succession training. In North Korea, a succession regime indicates a process in which successor succeeds the unitary leadership of suryong (supreme leader), and integrates himself with suryong’s revolutionary idea. During the period, suryong and the successor equally share the absolute status and decisive roles, forming and maintaining a collaborative government.

However, the advent of Kim Jong Un as successor was very different from that of Kim Jong Il’s. The late Kim Jong Il passed through the selection process of successor through the official party convention in accordance with Kim Il Sung’s request of carrying on the continuous revolution and due to aging of the first generation of revolutionaries after the 1960s. By contrast, the rise of Kim Jong Un as successor was Kim Jong Il’s personal choice. After Kim Jong Il collapsed with a stroke in August 2008, the first thing the ailing leader did before he appeared in public again in January 2009 was to designate Kim Jong Un as his successor. Obviously what triggered the emergence of Kim Jong Un was not because the party requested it but because Kim Jong Il’s health condition was deteriorating. In other words, if it had not been for Kim Jong Il’s health issue, the coming of Kim Jong Un as successor would have been much postponed.

The biggest worry to Kim Jong Il, whose health was declining with a stroke, was whether Kim Jong Un would be able to lead the North without protection of suryong. While Kim Jong Il had gone through the stable period of about 20 years for power transfer, Kim Jong Un had very little time, having only less than three years, to adapt himself to the unitary leadership system.