Institutional Change and Continuity in Korea’s Central Agencies, 1948-2011*

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Abstract: This article analyzes Korea’s central agencies, which have been organized and reorganized to support presidential executive leadership since the foundation of the Republic. Each central agency has carried out the standardization of a core administrative function which is essential to the operation of administrative apparatuses, including policy planning and coordination, budgeting, organizing, staffing, legislation, public relations, central-local relations, control and performance evaluation, etc. The six decades of institutionalization can be characterized, based on the central agencies’ proportion of the total administrative apparatus, into three phases: high (more than 35 percent, 1948-1961), middle (around 20 percent, 1962-2007), and low (about 10 percent, 2008-present). Regardless of the changing size and organizational configuration of the central agencies, however, their roles and influence as core executive apparatuses have remained largely unchanged, especially since the early 1960s. More than 67 percent, on average, of the heads and deputy heads of CAs have been former public servants, less than 18 percent have been former politicians, and about 15 percent have been former outside experts. This strong bureaucratic background has oriented Korea’s core executive policy direction significantly toward long-

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term, consistent, and plan rationality rather than short-term, flexible, and democratic responsiveness.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the institutional characteristics of the Korean state administration is the significant development of central agencies (CA). A number of CA, with the title of board, ministry, agency, or office, have been organized or reorganized under the president or the prime minister, and have effectively supported presidential leadership since the foundation of the Republic.

In the Western literature, CA are defined as the “departments, agencies, and offices [that] perform the functions [which are] essential to co-ordination and control of bureaucracy throughout government” (Campbell, 1983, p. 3) and “perform functions which directly affect all other government departments . . . often co-ordinate the interdepartmental development of policy . . . frequently develop policies which other departments must follow, in fields such as expenditure control and personnel management . . . [and] often monitor the performance of other departments” (Campbell & Szabowski, 1979, p. 2). This definition implies that the CA include all the core executive apparatuses. This article, however, differentiates the CA from the Presidential Secretariat, which has also been significantly developed as another important part of Korea’s core executive apparatuses.

The CA are regarded as the organizations that conduct executive or administrative functions that the chief executive is in charge of (Bernard, 1938; Gulick, 1937, p. 13), or as a “techstructure” to support the “strategic apex” with standardizing organizational operations (Mintzberg, 1979). Each CA carries out the standardization of core administrative functions that are essential to the operation of administrative apparatuses—such as policy planning and coordination, budgeting, organizing, staffing, managing the relationship between central and local government, legislation, public relations, controlling, and performance evaluation. By intervening in the operations of all administrative apparatuses through these standardizations, they ultimately sup-

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1. In the Canadian federal government, there are at least five CA: the Prime Minister’s Office, the Privy Council Office, the Federal-Provincial Relations Office, the Financial Department, and the Treasury Board Secretariat (Campbell & Szabowski, 1979).