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Day 1 Session I – Elite Cohesion: Probability of a Power Struggle Among the Elite

Elite cohesion in North Korea

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North Korean elites are cohesive but not homogenous. We tend not to consider the possibility that North Korean elites have very diverse interests and ideas while we are mesmerized with their feverish public rituals. Students of collective behaviors continue to point out that individual preferences cannot be driven from collective behaviors. For example, potentially very different distributions of individual preferences lead to the same collective behaviors through interdependent interactions. This cannot be more relevant than in the case of communist dictatorship where the fear of terror and purge creates “plurality ignorance”. This means that even inhabitants are very uncertain about what others really think in private and they also make the same fallacy as we do. Furthermore, it is widely known that communism could not maintain ideological purity among party cadres and the system itself relies on corrupt behaviors of party cadres. Simply speaking, party cadres are very opportunists. So it should be recognized that their incredible collective support for the regime and its causes is not a simple sum of individuals who put their faith in the system.

Now let's turn to three conditions that help maintain elite cohesion—nuclear weapons, a well-developed repressive state apparatus, and able-leadership. These can also be focused on military capacity, geopolitical location plant, and the confidence of regime longevity into the minds of elites. First, the ability of massive retaliation of North Korea against military intervention eliminates the possibility of regime collapse from the outside. Second, North Korea has nothing but the state. Extreme poverty and no marketable asset coexist with the highly developed oppressive state. This situation is quite opposite to the resource-rich African countries. The state's coercive power enables the elites to squeeze the people to satisfy their personal desires. However, the state institutions are not movable. This prevents the North Korean elites from “stealing the state”, which is the main cause of collapse for the USSR—strong leadership preempts focal points. Juche ideology formalizes the cult of personality. Furthermore, Kim Jung Il stands firm and show no sign to tolerate any kind of defiance. This adept leadership maintains the spiral of confidence among elites in regime durability.

Furthermore, the military-first line is supposed to consolidate elite cohesion in

North Korea, and should be regarded as a power-sharing between the Kim's family and military elites. The military-first propaganda and constitutional change for the Military Defense Committee work to improve collective action ability of the military elites thus implying erosion in the total rule that Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il has enjoyed. The military-first line, I argue, is a device to assure elites of their future status and to solve commitment issues. As a whole, the military-first-line contributes to short-term regime durability.

However, as I emphasized earlier, the elites are likely to be heterogeneous with respect to their political and personal orientations. This is likely to bring about an explosion when a small yet critical change occurs outside or inside North Korea. Given the severity of a crisis, North Korea might be seen as a meta-stable state where liquid or gas maintains its physical state beyond critical threshold. This meta-stability can be abruptly changed even by a speck of dust. North Korean elites have managed to sustain an unsustainable regime that is passing its survival threshold. Given this fragility, not a soft-landing but an abrupt breakdown is a highly likely event. Therefore, preparations must be made for the sudden collapse of the regime.