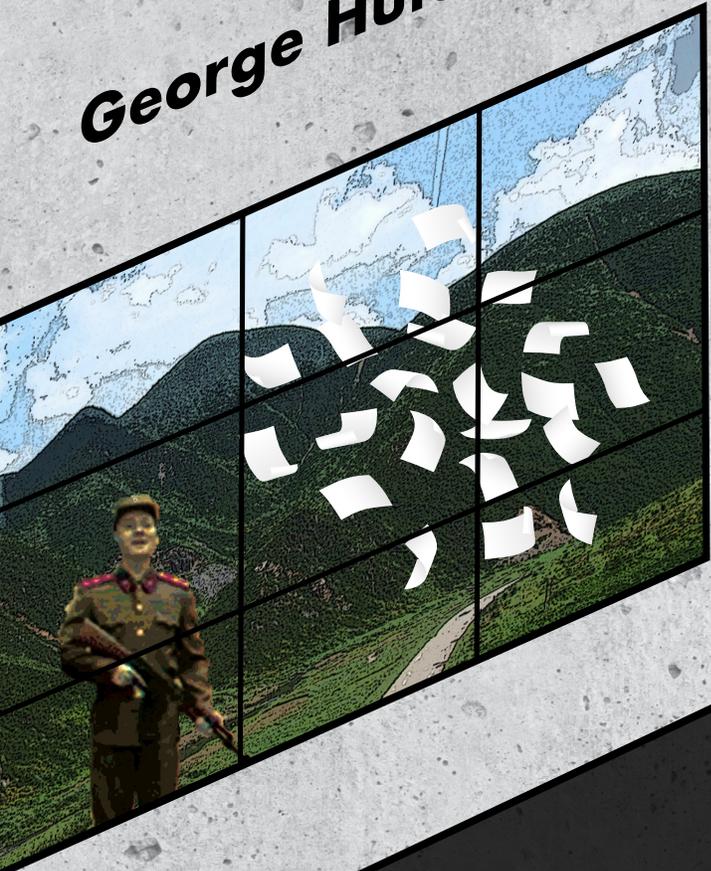




George Hutchinson



ARMY OF THE INDOCTRINATED

The Suryong, the Soldier,
and Information in the KPA

**주체의 핵강국,
세계적인 군사대국의
자주적존엄과 위용을
만방에 떨치자!**



ARMY
OF THE
INDOCTRINATED

The Suryong, the Soldier,
and Information in the KPA

GEORGE HUTCHINSON

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Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

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The views expressed in this report are the author's own and are not intended to represent those of other organizations he is affiliated with.

ABOUT HRNK

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) is the leading U.S.-based nonpartisan, non-governmental organization (NGO) in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy, tasked to focus international attention on human rights abuses in that country. It is HRNK's mission to persistently remind policymakers, opinion leaders, and the general public that more than 20 million North Koreans need our attention. Since its establishment in October 2001, HRNK has played an important intellectual leadership role in North Korean human rights issues by publishing more than 50 major reports (available at <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>). Recent reports have addressed issues including the health and human rights of North Korean children, political prison camps, the dominant role that Pyongyang plays in North Korea's political system, North Korea's state sponsorship of terrorism, the role of illicit activities in the North Korean economy, the structure of the internal security apparatus, the *songbun* social classification system, and the abduction of South Korean and foreign citizens.

HRNK is the first and only NGO that solely focuses on North Korean human rights issues to receive consultative status at the United Nations (UN). It was also the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly and actively involved in all stages of the process supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights. Its reports have been cited numerous times in the report of the COI, the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights, a report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, two reports of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and several U.S. Department of State Democratic People's Republic of Korea Human Rights Reports. HRNK has also regularly been invited to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress.

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ARMY OF THE INDOCTRINATED

The Suryong, the Soldier, and Information in the KPA

FOREWORD

George Hutchinson's *The Suryong, the Soldier, and Information in the KPA* is the second of three building blocks of a multi-year HRNK project to examine North Korea's information environment. Since the humanitarian crisis of the 1990s, more information from the outside world has been entering North Korea, following the informal markets and supply lines established from the Sino-North Korean border to the capital city of Pyongyang. The North Korean regime has been cracking down on such information and has been suppressing those accessing it, especially since early 2020, under the pretext of COVID prevention.

Hutchinson's thoroughly researched and sourced report addresses the circulation of information within the Korean People's Army (KPA). Understanding how KPA soldiers receive their information is needed to prepare information campaigns while taking into account all possible contingencies. The report examines official propaganda and indoctrination delivered to North Korean soldiers, all along the chain of control and command. *Information in the KPA* examines the media vehicles and content that reach North Korean soldiers, in particular those forward-deployed south of the Pyongyang-Wonsan line, who constitute 70 to 80 percent of the KPA.

Hutchinson provides the information, analysis and recommendations needed to inform KPA soldiers on the real situation outside North Korea, the human rights violations affecting them, and the corruption of their leadership. Members of the KPA of all ages and ranks surreptitiously access information from the outside world via USB, micro SD card, Netels and other means, including their own communication devices. But, under the draconian supervision of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP)'s Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), the military, security, and ideological components of the KPA chain of command continue to be stovepiped, and information is tightly controlled. Lack of access to vital information about both domestic and international developments can spell disaster in case of a Korean peninsula contingency. The report provides material needed to prepare for armed conflict, regime collapse, to avoid catastrophe induced by lack of information, but also to sustain internal resistance, if needed, to provide lines of emergency communication outside regime control, and to prepare for complex humanitarian emergencies.

Greg Scarlatoiu
Executive Director
April 26, 2022

1. INTRODUCTION

Once again, North Korea is showing signs of crisis. It is increasingly choked off from the outside world as it struggles with a spiraling economy. For decades, North Korea's system of dynastic, totalitarian rule has eked through tough times, demonstrating a unique and defiant form of resilience. However, there are limits to how much stress any system can withstand. Numerous possible implosion scenarios exist, along with innumerable factors that are capable of triggering one. Mishaps could pelt the regime serially, in painful succession, or in combinations. Multiple crises could erupt simultaneously, exposing the limitations of the supreme leader's ruling apparatus. Should the Kim regime fail to withstand such shocks, the Korean People's Army (KPA), cut off from the vertically rigid command-and-control relationship with the supreme leader, could behave in dangerously unpredictable ways that would have catastrophic repercussions for Northeast Asia.

In any regime destabilization scenario, KPA units, lacking a supreme command-and-control node, may have no other choice than to execute pre-assigned tasks with no regard nor understanding of real-world events. To deal with such high stakes, primacy must be put not only on maintaining up-to-date, well-coordinated contingency plans, but also on developing an understanding of communication pathways capable of reaching KPA military forces in the event of a regime breakdown. To provide lines of emergency communication outside of broken-down regime channels, information must be disseminated to inform KPA forces, down to the soldier level. A crucial first step in this effort is to understand Kim Jong-un's idiosyncratic approach to wielding power and control downward and throughout North Korea's monolithic system of autocratic rule. Designed to protect the Kim regime, suppress potential dissent, and block outside information from flowing into North Korea, it is precisely this system of control that has enabled the country to repeatedly muddle through crises.

The *Suryong*—North Korea's "supreme leader"—sits at the apex of North Korea's political, economic, military, and social systems with absolute authority over everything that happens in the country. Kim Jong-un, the current *Suryong*, wields his power through a system of dynastic, autocratic rule based on a governing ideology (*Juche*) and implemented through a single political faction, the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). Owing largely to Kim's predisposition toward the KWP, the Party Congress has been reactivated. At each Party Congress, a quinquennial gathering of high-level KWP delegates and observers, the country's performance is assessed, charters are revised, and strategic goals are set. Policy decisions for the following five years are subsequently directed across, down and throughout the Party apparatus.

Kim Jong-un used the Eighth Party Congress, held in January 2021, as both a KWP Central Committee-level *saenghwal chonghwa* 'self-criticism' session and a launch vehicle for a nationwide campaign of political control. Kim opened the Congress by forthrightly admitting the failures of the previous five-year plan to improve the economy. Kim's proposed solution to fixing the economy is a "more Party" approach that emphasizes self-sufficiency and self-reliance. After the Congress, Kim exerted the Party apparatus more deeply down and across the local levels in a three-pronged campaign to block the flow of outside information into North Korea, crack down on so-called corrupt officials, and tightly seal the borders. As an essential element of the regime's power apparatus, the KPA is affected by each prong in this campaign of intensifying control—a campaign that adds even greater constriction to an already rigid command structure, making it

vital for outside planners to understand the vertical command-and-control relationship between the KPA and the supreme leader.

Despite North Korea's relatively small population of 25 million, the KPA fields the fourth largest military force in the world. It consists of well over one million soldiers—about six percent of the country's population—serving the active duty ranks of the country's extensive ground-centric military organization, which also includes special operations, air, naval, strategic, and reserve units. An additional 25 to 30 percent of the population belong to the reserves. As the Suryong, Kim Jong-un has absolute control over the KPA. His authority extends from two organs of power—the KWP and the State Affairs Commission, of which he was named chairman to both at the previous Congress in 2016. Through these organs, the KPA is controlled using a threefold system comprised of a political chain, an anti-coup security chain, and a standard military chain of command.

At each unit level throughout the KPA, the commander is flanked on each side by two individuals. On one side is the political officer, and on the other side is the security officer. In this highly constricted system of control, the state and Party apparatus are merged into a unitary command-and-control mechanism. While the top-to-bottom nature of information flow in the KPA is generally understood—orders flow down, information flows up—the day-to-day information practices, processes, and procedures of KPA soldiers at the unit level are less clear. Kim Jong-un's three-pronged campaign to increase control through the Party apparatus will only further suffocate an already heavily strangulated system of command-and-control. Adequately measuring and responding to this impact is difficult, due to gaps in understanding how information is processed within the KPA.

This report seeks to address gaps in understanding how information is processed inside the KPA. Should destabilizing factors overwhelm the Kim regime's ability to cope, an implosion scenario could occur, with KPA units having no other choice but to default to pre-built checklists and execute pre-assigned tasks with a limited understanding of actual events going on around them. To effectuate information insertion points and pathways to the soldier, this report seeks to elucidate how information is processed in the KPA: types and characteristics of information; technologies, systems, and procedures used; access and control; and organizations involved in the dissemination of information. For this purpose, the report gathers responses from in-depth interviews with former KPA soldiers with varying experiences to paint a more comprehensive picture of not only how official information flows from the apex of the KPA down to the individual soldier, but also how KPA soldiers process day-to-day duty-related information and how foreign, outside information is accessed and consumed.

2. CHRONIC SURVIVOR: RESILIENCY AND VULNERABILITIES OF THE KIM REGIME

2.I. Introduction

North Korea's system of dynastic, totalitarian rule has faced many challenges across two hereditary transfers of power. These include near-total international isolation, painful international sanctions, failed economic policies, famine, recurring food shortages, widespread malnutrition, and damages due to punishing seasonal rainfall.¹ The North Korean regime is based on a governing ideology that espouses "self-reliance" and is implemented through a single political faction—the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). Despite the perpetually wretched conditions inside North Korea, the country's supreme leadership, when faced with a seemingly insurmountable crisis or tipping point, has shown that it can muddle through. The country has demonstrated a unique and defiant form of resilience. To be sure, North Korea has weathered disasters, eked through self-inflicted crises, and managed precarious dynastic successions. But how long can the Kim regime maintain its precarious approach to crisis management?

Implosion scenarios abound. There are countless internal and external factors that could destabilize the Kim regime. They range from direct internal challenges to the supreme leader in the form of coups or uprisings to external pressure from ongoing international sanctions. They also include natural events, such as the sudden death of Kim Jong-un or an extreme seasonal flood that inflicts widespread damage. They also include unnatural events, such as a Chernobyl-type disaster. Mishaps could pelt the regime serially, in painful succession, or in combinations. In a nightmare scenario for Kim Jong-un, simultaneous crises could shake the regime and force poor decisions that finally expose the regime's inability to cope. Despite the defiant resilience it has demonstrated so far, the Kim regime is unquestionably vulnerable. There is an ever-present potential for a crisis of the regime to create an implosive mess of catastrophic proportions for Northeast Asia.

This section will briefly examine major crises confronting North Korea since the country's downturn in 1989. It will also explain how the Kim regime has survived through remarkably turbulent periods. Next, the section examines the current situation inside North Korea to assess ongoing challenges that could test or even possibly overwhelm the Kim regime's ability to cope. Finally, the section hypothesizes a highly plausible outcome that requires close, near-term attention. Should the Kim regime fail to withstand shocks to its ruling structure, the Korean People's Army (KPA), incapable of operating as a well-informed entity due to the top-down, vertical nature of its command-and-control relationship with the supreme leader, would behave in dangerously unpredictable ways.

¹ For continued challenges facing North Korea, see Bruce Klingner, "Assessing the Situation in North Korea After the Death of Kim Jong-il," in 5th KINU-USIP Washington Workshop, *The Outlook for the North Korean Situation & Prospects for U.S.-ROK Cooperation After the Death of Kim Jong-il* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2012), 17-18; <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/1ea5303f-6f9f-465e-b15c-5cea7fdd8da0>, accessed March 30, 2021.

2.2. Turbulent Downturn

2.2.1. *It's 1989 and Russia & China are About to Turn Away from North Korea*

For North Korea, the events leading into the 1990s were tantamount to disaster. South Korea had successfully made its historic international debut as a rising economic power by hosting the 1988 Summer Olympics and was in the midst of opening a trade office in Moscow. In 1989, communism began crumbling in Europe: first in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and then in East Germany. The Soviet Union withdrew its remaining troops out of Afghanistan, signaling an end to the Kremlin's influence. Even in China, change was in the air as pro-democracy demonstrations rocked Tiananmen Square. As communism disintegrated, once-powerful dictators were ousted from the perches of power and made to face judgment. U.S. troops launched an invasion of Panama, quickly captured General Manuel Noriega and delivered him to the U.S. to face criminal charges. By the end of this explosive year, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife were arrested, tried, and executed by a firing squad with cameras rolling at a military base in Targoviste on Christmas Day.

By 1990, a year before its dissolution, the Soviet Union established formal relations with South Korea. Beijing and Seoul also established diplomatic relations soon after. Caught in the rapidly changing international order, North Korea grew increasingly isolated. The Kim regime's distress was compounded by the demonstration of U.S. military power in the 1991 Gulf War. Live 24-hour coverage of the war, streamed in homes and offices throughout the world, showcased the debut of the Patriot missile defense system and precision-guided munitions that obliterated Iraqi troops, tanks, and artillery pieces. This display of U.S. power not only underscored the ineffectiveness of outdated Soviet doctrine and conventional weapons, but also highlighted the disturbing effectiveness of U.S. airpower and high-tech weaponry. The U.S. had won the Cold War, and a powerful South Korea was emerging as a preferred partner of Russia and China. As if these developments were not sufficiently disastrous, North Korea began to slide into a painful famine.

2.2.2. *Famine Sets in Across the North*

North Korea's economy plunged into a steep decline after the breakup of the Soviet Union, precipitating one of the 20th century's worst famines. Prior to its dissolution, the Soviet Union had been the primary provider of subsidized fertilizer, energy, and manufactured goods to Pyongyang—essential ingredients supporting North Korea's industrial and agricultural sectors. Russia's diplomatic recognition of South Korea and China's demands to North Korea for hard currency in return for its exports further isolated North Korea and cut it off from concessional trade. Confronted with these diplomatic and trade shocks, North Korea's industrialized economy began to collapse. As this reality set in, North Korea also found itself wrapped up in tense nuclear negotiations with the U.S. that had escalated into a full-blown crisis by 1994. On the heels of averting a nuclear crisis after Jimmy Carter's last-minute visit to Pyongyang, Kim Il-sung died. This made dynastic succession the new and immediate focus for North Korea's elites. While these factors likely hindered the North Korean leadership's ability to promptly address the causes of

the food shortage and appropriately adjust to the situation, Pyongyang's failure to maintain food imports and aggressively seek humanitarian aid early on plunged the country into famine.²

By the early 1990s, reports of widespread hunger in North Korea began to surface. In 1991, to deal with the apparent food shortages, Pyongyang reduced food rations through the government-run public distribution system (PDS) and began a campaign of "let's eat two meals a day." The government also encouraged citizens to scavenge for "wild foods, such as roots, grasses, stalks, and tree bark" as "healthy and safe sources of nutrients."³ Moreover, there were claims that roughly a third of the country's factories had shut down, with half of the remaining factories operating sporadically due to energy and raw material shortages.⁴ By 1995, the point at which North Korea first began reaching out to the international community for emergency food supplies, rising mortality rates and signs of protracted malnutrition indicated that the famine was already well under way. While various figures have been used to describe the scale of the disaster, estimates of North Korean victims who died due to the famine range between 600,000 and 1.5 million people—about 5 percent of the population.⁵

The international community responded generously with massive food aid that was worth billions of dollars.⁶ International food aid through the UN World Food Program (WFP) and bilateral aid gifted directly to North Korea from neighboring countries was instrumental in ending the famine, although food shortages continued. The U.S. was the largest contributor to the WFP, while China and South Korea were the largest bilateral providers of food to North Korea.⁷ With food supplies re-accumulating, North Korea officially declared the end of the "Arduous March" in October 2000 during events coinciding with the 55th anniversary of the KWP. The October 3, 2000 edition of the *Nodong Sinmun* read, "No people or nation in the history of mankind has endured a greater period of peril."⁸ Despite the declaration that the worst of times was over, North Korea continued to receive substantial amounts of food aid.

2 See the following seminal works by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland: *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 9–10, 27; and "Sanctioning North Korea: The Political Economy of Denuclearization and Proliferation," *Asian Survey* 50.3 (2010): 542–43; *Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2005), 13.

3 Amnesty International, *The Crumbling State of Health Care in North Korea* (London: Amnesty International Publishing, 2010), 5; <https://amnesty.or.kr/wp-content/uploads/bcp-attach/NK-Health-Report.pdf>, accessed March 30, 2021.

4 Nicholas D. Kristof, "THE WORLD; A Stalinist's Paradise in Korea Flounders," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1991.

5 Haggard and Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights*, 8, 18; Sandra Fahy, *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1, 4; also, see Haggard and Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*, 1 for more focused estimates—between 600,000 and 1 million deaths, or between 3 and 5 percent of the population.

6 See Haggard and Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights*, 10.

7 Mark E. Manyin, *Foreign Assistance to North Korea*, CRS Report No. RL31785 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 26, 2005), 6.

8 "1990s: The Death of Kim Il-sung and Rule by Legacy," *KBS World*, http://world.kbs.co.kr/special/northkorea/contents/archives/outline/outline_1990.htm?lang=e, accessed April 1, 2021.

2.2.3. *Regaining Control*

With multiple streams of aid flowing in, North Korea was able to turn to less intrusive bilateral donors, primarily China and South Korea. This allowed the Kim regime to influence the distribution of aid within its borders and regain some control. As China and South Korea increased bilateral food aid through the mid-2000s, the role of the WFP declined.⁹ By May 2006, the WFP had scaled down from being able to distribute food to 163 counties inside North Korea to only 30, and its staff was pared from more than 40 to only 10 workers.¹⁰ Without effective monitoring in place, it was widely suspected that food aid was being diverted, both as priority rations for the military and by the elites who were skimming the supplies to keep for themselves, or to profit by selling to the markets that were emerging at the time. Regardless of the distortions this may have caused, the international relief effort for North Korea ultimately helped the regime recover from the famine. The inflow of external aid increased domestic supplies, eased demand, and lowered market prices, all of which combined to increase the amount of food available throughout the country.¹¹

2.2.4. *The Pivot from Butter to Guns*

On July 4, 2006, after an eight-year pause, North Korea launched a provocative salvo of rockets—seven ballistic missiles, including short-range Scuds, medium-range Nodongs and a Taepodong-2 precursor to the intercontinental ballistic missiles it would later develop.¹² In a surprise response by the Roh Moo-Hyun administration, which had been maintaining a “sunshine policy” of engagement with Kim Jong-il, South Korea suspended humanitarian aid on July 14, effectively cutting off a 500,000-ton shipment of rice slated for delivery to North Korea.¹³ Later that month, torrential rains pummeled North Korea, sweeping away entire villages, destroying tens of thousands of houses, and leaving hundreds dead or missing.¹⁴ Up to 54,700 people were reportedly dead or missing and as many as 2.5 million were left homeless. With hundreds of bridges destroyed and thousands of acres of farmland flooded, food prices skyrocketed.¹⁵ Amidst

9 Mark E. Manyin and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, *Foreign Assistance to North Korea*, CRS Report No. R40095 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, April 26, 2012), 14.

10 Kirit Radia, “North Korea Food Aid Revived, Without U.S.,” *ABC News*, May 11, 2006, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=1952301&page=1>, accessed April 1, 2021.

11 For a cogent discussion on the normative implications of food aid during the North Korean famine, see William J. Moon, “The Origins of the Great North Korean Famine: Its Dynamics and Normative Implications,” *North Korean Review* 5.1 (Spring 2009), 114–15.

12 For detailed data on North Korea’s missile tests, see the CNS missile test database, “The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database,” The Nuclear Threat Initiative, produced by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, updated March 31, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/>, accessed April 3, 2021.

13 Anthony Faiola, “S. Korea Suspends Food Aid to North,” *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/13/AR2006071300751.html>, accessed April 3, 2021.

14 “‘Hundreds Dead’ in N Korea Floods,” *BBC News*, July 21, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5202482.stm>, accessed April 3, 2021.

15 “Floods Claim Huge Toll in North Korea, Group Says,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2006.

these catastrophic conditions, North Korea—at an impasse in its denuclearization negotiations with the U.S. at the time—pressed forward, favoring guns over butter.

North Korea conducted its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006. Five days later, in unanimous condemnation, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1718.¹⁶ Although humanitarian assistance was kept exempt from international sanctions, food aid from each of North Korea's primary donors—China, South Korea, the U.S., Japan, and Europe—had declined dramatically through 2006.¹⁷ On top of the greatly reduced food aid, North Korea again experienced catastrophic flooding in the summer of 2007. An average of 20.6 inches of rain fell between August 7 and 11, marking the heaviest downpours in North Korea since 1967. Hundreds were reportedly killed or missing and up to 300,000 were left homeless. North Korea's Agriculture Ministry claimed that 11 percent of the country's farmland used to grow rice and corn had been wiped out.¹⁸ On August 20, former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-Bak won the nomination of the conservative Grand National Party. Lee was immediately established as the front-runner to succeed the very unpopular Roh Moo-Hyun in the presidential elections, slated for December.¹⁹ Lee won the election as expected, signaling a death knell to the "sunshine policy" of engagement with North Korea.

2.2.5. *Fears of Another Famine*

By 2008, food and energy prices were soaring around the world due to the global financial crisis, and there were growing concerns that North Korea was on the verge of yet another major famine. The price of food staples in North Korea had doubled over the previous year. For the average worker, one third of a month's salary was required to buy a two-pound bag of rice. By April, the WFP warned of impending food shortages that would lead to a humanitarian crisis.²⁰ In mid-August, Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke. This episode and Kim's uncertain condition triggered concern among analysts over prospects of who would take his place and the potential for a power struggle should he not recover.²¹ Ailing and needing to put a succession plan in place, Kim turned to his brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek.

16 "Security Council Condemns Nuclear Test by Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1718 (2006)," United Nations Security Council, October 14, 2006, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8853.doc.htm>, accessed April 3, 2021.

17 Manyin and Nikitin, *Foreign Assistance to North Korea*, 13.

18 Burt Herman, "North Korea: Deadly Rains Ruin Big Part Of Farmland," *Associated Press*, August 16, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/15/AR2007081502180.html?hpid=sec-world>, accessed April 3, 2021.

19 Norimitsu Onishi, "Former Seoul Mayor Is Picked as Presidential Candidate," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/21/world/asia/21skorea.html>, accessed April 3, 2021.

20 "WFP Warns of Potential Humanitarian Food Crisis in DPRK Following Critically Low Harvest," *Reliefweb*, April 16, 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-peoples-republic-korea/wfp-warns-potential-humanitarian-food-crisis-dprk-following>, accessed April 3, 2021.

21 Mark Mazzetti and Choe Sang-Hun, "Analysts Try to Envision North Korea in Transition," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2008.

On April 9, 2009, Jang Song-taek was appointed as a National Defense Commission (NDC) Vice Chair at the opening session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).²² A few days before the 12th SPA, Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's third son, was assigned to a low-level post in the NDC.²³ It seemed that a successor had been chosen, and Jang was put in charge of managing the succession. North Korea tightened control as it prepared for yet another hereditary transfer of power amidst continued food shortages.

2.2.6. *Suspicion of the Markets and the Need for Control*

By November 2009, the WFP was reporting that, due to lack of donor funding, it had only received 15 percent of the \$500 million needed to execute its program objective of reaching more than six million North Koreans in need of food aid. It would thus have to reduce the number of aid recipients to under two million. For its part, North Korea was making it more difficult for the WFP to operate due to stricter restrictions on the program. These included not allowing Korean speakers to work on the WFP staff and requiring the program to give seven days' notice in advance of a site visit, as opposed to the previously allowed window of 24-hours.²⁴ As food supplies dwindled, North Korea increased its control over the populace. Among the prominent targets of control were the markets (*jangmadang*) that had sprung up during the 1990s famine as the PDS collapsed and North Koreans had to fend for themselves to survive.

These markets had been tolerated by the Kim regime as a "necessary evil," as they provided both a means to maintain food distribution and a location for foreign aid donors to supply and distribute food. Eventually, the markets grew in number and sophistication. They were used not only for distributing food, but also for selling consumer electronics and devices that could be used to access outside information. While government authorities reluctantly tolerated the markets, they remained suspicious and periodically conducted crackdowns. Together, the growth of markets and the inflow of food aid had prevented the occurrence of another famine. However, by the fall of 2009, there appeared signs that Kim Jong-il's policies were creating the potential for another disaster in North Korea.²⁵

2.2.7. *Failed Currency Reform*

On November 30, 2009, the Kim regime suddenly announced it was launching confiscatory currency reform. All bills and coins in circulation were to be replaced with new currency. With Kim Jong-il in ill health and faced with the challenge of leadership succession,

22 "Jang Song Taek Becomes NDC Vice Chairman, Choe Yong Rim Cabinet Premier," *North Korea Leadership Watch*, June 7, 2010, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/2010/06/07/jang-song-taek-becomes-ndc-vice-chairman-choe-yong-rim-cabinet-premier/>, accessed April 3, 2021.

23 "N. Korean Leader's Son Appointed to Post in Top Military Body: Source," *Yonhap News*, April 26, 2009, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20090426000900315>, accessed April 3, 2021.

24 "World Food Program Reports Difficulties in North Korea," VOA, November 2, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/archive/world-food-program-reports-difficulties-north-korea>, accessed April 3, 2021.

25 Blaine Harden, "North Korea Tightening Its Restrictions on Markets, Food Aid," *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2009.

there was increasing apprehension over the socioeconomic changes that were taking place outside of the regime's control. This currency reform was intended to reassert state control and revive North Korea's planned, socialist economy. Thus, the regime's surprise crackdown targeted the burgeoning markets that had sprung up across the country. The November 30 decree gave North Korean citizens only one week to convert a limited amount of their existing currency to new, revalued bank notes at a rate of 100 to 1. One won in the new denomination would be worth 100 won of the previous denomination at trade-in. Old cash kept on hand above the allowable limit would be rendered worthless, effectively wiping out household savings and private working capital. Panic ensued, with people scrambling to buy foreign exchange or physical goods to preserve the value of their existing cash. This caused the black-market value of the North Korean won to plummet. The North Korean government responded by clamping down further, banning foreign currency, enforcing price controls, and further limiting market operations.²⁶

Panic and confusion were quickly followed by public outrage. There were numerous accounts describing how the revaluation policy was backfiring and producing negative effects, including inflation, food shortages, and violence. One report described an attack on North Korean officials who were conducting a "Fifty Day Battle" against illegal enterprises in Pyongseong, North Pyongan Province. Another reported the killing of a security agent in Chongjin by a steel worker. The public reaction was strong enough for the Kim regime to reassess the situation.²⁷

In February 2010, the North Korean government offered a rare public apology through its Premier, Kim Yong-il. The Premier reportedly called the leaders of the *inminban*, the lowest unit of neighborhood Party control, each consisting of roughly 20-40 households, and apologized for the pain caused by the currency reform. He also promised to stabilize the economic situation.²⁸ The following month, on March 12, Park Nam-gi, the former Director of the Planning and Financial Department of the KWP's Central Committee, was charged with being a "traitor who trapped the people in misery with this redenomination" and was executed before Party cadres at a stadium in Pyongyang.²⁹

2.2.8. Succession Planning

At a Party parliamentary session in June 2010, Kim Yong-il was dismissed from his position as Premier for his role in the failed currency reform. At the same session, Jang Song-taek

26 Marcus Noland, "North Korea's Failed Currency Reform," *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, February 5, 2010, <https://www.piie.com/commentary/op-eds/north-koreas-failed-currency-reform>, accessed April 3, 2021. For a comprehensive analysis of the 2009 currency reform as an anti-market initiative taken by the regime to shift the economy from private activity and back to state control, see Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "The Winter of Their Discontent: Pyongyang Attacks the Market," *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, Policy Brief No. PB10-1, January 2010, <https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/publications/pb/pb10-01.pdf>, accessed June 22, 2021.

27 Richard Lloyd Parry, "Food Shortages and Violence Mount in North Korea as Utopian Dream Fails," *The Times*, February 4, 2010.

28 Aidan Foster-Carter, "North Korea: It's the Economy, Stupid," *East Asia Forum*, March 11, 2010, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2010/03/11/north-korea-its-the-economy-stupid/>, April 3, 2021.

29 Lee Sung-Jin, "Execution Confirmed by Capital Source," *Daily NK*, April 5, 2010, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/execution-confirmed-by-capital-sou/>, accessed April 3, 2021.

was promoted to Vice Chairman of the NDC, reporting directly to the Chairman, Kim Jong-il. This solidified Jang's role in helping to prepare for his nephew's successful dynastic leadership succession.³⁰ The pace of strategically positioning Kim Jong-un for hereditary succession accelerated over the following months. On September 28, he was elevated to Vice Chairman of the KWP's Central Military Commission (CMC) during a party conference, having been promoted to four-star general the day before.³¹ These steps prepared the ground for Kim Jong-un to transition into the role of North Korea's supreme leader after Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011.

2.2.9. *Fast Forward: New Signs of Crisis in North Korea*

Speculation among media and policy practitioners over whether the Kim regime could survive the 2012 dynastic succession had a lasting effect. Once it seemed clear that the succession of power had been completed, observers and analysts of North Korea came to widely accept that the Kim regime, no matter how sickly, would manage to continue muddling through its tribulations. Not long after the succession, nuclear weapons took center stage once again. Concurrent with Kim Jong-un settling into his role as the supreme leader, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs began to accelerate.³² Since then, international attention has been mostly focused on security issues—from the tests and missile launches that culminated in late 2017 to the three rounds of Trump-Kim summitry that began in 2018, with hopes for a denuclearization deal. This has remained unchanged as of this writing, with the world waiting to see how the Biden administration will address the security threat posed by North Korea.

The domestic crisis currently brewing inside North Korea is receiving far less attention. Kim Jong-un has triumphantly announced to the entire world the completion of his nuclear program. However, even he knows that there is a limit to how much more this well-worn repertoire can be trotted out at the expense of a hungry populace. In a major embarrassment for Kim, aspirations for getting the North Korean economy on track were dashed at the Hanoi summit in February 2019 when he tried to negotiate a generous package of sanctions relief “up front” in return for a watered-down offer to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex. Donald Trump rejected the offer, resulting in a long train ride home for the empty-handed North Korean leader. Economic sanctions have remained in place ever since. Trump, the only sitting U.S. president to ever engage a North Korean leader directly, lost his re-election bid, causing any remaining threads of leader-to-leader engagement to disappear. Kim now must start from scratch. Meanwhile, there are no obvious signs that North Korea's economy can improve any time soon.

Kim Jong-un, in the lonely way that leaders might survey the landscape from their perch, likely senses that the people's patience is running thin. On January 5, 2021, at the opening of the Eighth KWP Congress, North Korea's largest and most important political event, he admitted that

30 “N. Korean Leadership Shuffle May Be About Succession, Scapegoats,” *VOA*, June 8, 2010, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/n-korean-leadership-shuffle-may-be-about-succession-scapegoats>, accessed April 3, 2021.

31 “N. Korea Starts Power Succession, Giving Leader's Son Political Posts,” *Yonhap News*, September 30, 2010, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20100929008500325>, accessed April 3, 2021.

32 North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in 2013. After a year without missile tests, missile launches began again in 2012 and accelerated thereafter.

the regime had fallen short of meeting its economic goals.³³ Later, at an October military parade celebrating the founding of the KWP, he openly shed tears during his speech while apologizing for the regime's failures.³⁴ The outlook does not look favorable. Sanctions continue and the country's border with China has remained sealed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, causing trade with its neighbor to plummet by 75 percent during the first 10 months of 2020.³⁵ These dire signs are worrisome omens of regime instability.

2.2.10. Remaining Alert for Regime Instability

In late April 2020, rumors about Kim Jong-un's health grabbed short-lived headlines. The cheese-loving, chain-smoking leader was reportedly being treated after undergoing a "cardiovascular procedure."³⁶ The previous month, North Korea's state news agency issued a self-flattering statement about the country's response to COVID-19, praising the regime for keeping the number of cases at zero. Even at this early stage of the pandemic, North Korea's claim seemed highly dubious. The pandemic had first struck Wuhan, and the first country outside of China to experience a surge in COVID cases was South Korea. North Korea happens to be sandwiched between the two countries.³⁷ Was this seemingly flagrant suppression of information intended to hide something?

Kim's absence from several key events that April, including the annual public celebration of his grandfather's birthday, fueled speculation over the status of his health. Adding to the disquietude were reports that made it appear as though chaos was erupting. The movement of trains was allegedly disrupted on both sides of Sino-North Korean border, and low-flying helicopters were spotted over Pyongyang as panic-stricken residents stockpiled goods. Meanwhile, the U.S. was monitoring indications that suggested Kim was in purported "grave danger." In early May, as quickly as it had begun, speculation over Kim's ill health ground to a halt when pictures appeared of him at a ribbon-cutting event.³⁸

33 Shim Kyu-Seok, "Kim Concedes Economic Shortfalls as Congress Opens," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 6, 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/01/06/national/northKorea/North-Korea-8th-Party-Congress-Kim-Jongun/20210106165200570.html>, accessed January 10, 2021.

34 "Kim Jong Un's Admitting to Economic Failure," *The Dong-A Ilbo*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20210107/2353213/1/Kim-Jong-Un-s-admitting-to-economic-failure>, accessed January 10, 2021.

35 Kim Hyung-Jin and Kim Tong-Hyung, "Mired in Crises, North Korea's Kim to Open Big Party Meeting," *Associated Press*, December 29, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-seoul-south-korea-north-korea-storms-5cae55abfc7a3db4ee10672530d591b7>, accessed January 10, 2021.

36 Ha Yoon-Ah, "김정은, 최근 심혈관 시술 받았다... 여전히 특각서 치료 중" [Kim Jong-un Receives Recent Cardiovascular Procedure...Still Being Treated at Villa], *Daily NK*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/김정은-최근-심혈관-시술-받았다여전히-특각서-치/>, accessed January 3, 2021.

37 George Hutchinson, "Reckless Response: North Korea Should Come Clean on COVID-19," Center for Security Policy Studies, *George Mason University*, March 19, 2020, <http://csps.gmu.edu/2020/03/19/reckless-response-north-korea-should-come-clean-on-covid-19/>, accessed January 5, 2021.

38 For overlapping coverage of the speculative reporting and reactions over Kim Jong-un's status, see Ha, "Kim Jong Un Receives Recent Cardiovascular Procedure...Still Being Treated at Villa"; Anna Fifield, "Is the Talk About Kim Jong Un Being Sick—or Worse—True? Pyongyang is Abuzz, Too," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/is-the-talk-about-kim-jong->

As tightly as North Korea may be controlled, however, the regime remains vulnerable. Should the regime unsuccessfully withstand shocks to its ruling structure, a countless number of unsettling scenarios could unfold.

The extent to which Kim Jong-un may or may not have been debilitated during April 2020 may never be completely understood. What is important is that this media-driven speculation over Kim's health prompted decisionmakers, planners, and policy practitioners to re-evaluate regime instability and dynastic power succession in the Kim regime, along with the attendant risks and possible responses. Under the leadership of Kim Jong-un's father and grandfather, the Kim regime demonstrated a high degree of resilience, weathering natural disasters, muddling through self-inflicted crises, and managing precarious dynastic successions. The success demonstrated by the regime in past crises has largely been due to its agile foreign policy maneuvers and the enforcement of strict internal controls through the Party apparatus and other state mechanisms. Tactics of state control are employed to restrict society, regulate ideas and information, severely punish violators, and target scapegoats when necessary.³⁹ This ensures that those at the highest levels, including the supreme leader, avoid accountability.

un-being-sick--or-worse--true-pyongyang-is-abuzz-too/2020/04/26/d29b9770-873e-11ea-81a3-9690c9881111_story.html; Jim Sciotto, Joshua Berlinger, Yoonjung Seo, Kylie Atwood and Zachary Cohen, "US Monitoring Intelligence That North Korean Leader is in Grave Danger After Surgery," *CNN*, April 21, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/20/politics/kim-jong-un-north-korea/index.html>; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "North Korea's Leader May Be in Ill Health. Here's What We Know About Instability in the World's Most Secretive Regime," *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/22/north-koreas-leader-may-be-ill-health-heres-what-we-know-about-instability-worlds-most-secretive-regime/>; Chad O'Carroll and Oliver Hotham, "Life Continues as Normal in Pyongyang as Kim Jong Un Health Rumors Swirl," *NK News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/04/life-continues-as-normal-in-pyongyang-as-kim-jong-un-health-rumors-swirl/>; Choe Sang-Hun, "Kim Jong-un Is Back. What Happens When He's Really Gone?" *The New York Times*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/asia/kim-jong-un-alive.html>; Paul Farhl, "Kim Jong Un Appears to be Alive After All. So Why Did CNN and Other News Outlets Report He Was on His Deathbed?," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/kim-jong-un-appears-to-be-alive-after-all-so-how-did-his-death-make-the-news/2020/05/05/e9cf7f0e-8d6c-11ea-a0bc-4e9ad4866d21_story.html; all accessed January 3, 2021.

39 For a detailed description of North Korea's "Authoritarian Toolbox," see Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security* 35.1 (Summer 2010), 44-74.

As tightly as North Korea may be controlled, however, the regime remains vulnerable. Should the regime unsuccessfully withstand shocks to its ruling structure, a countless number of unsettling scenarios could unfold.⁴⁰

2.2.II. *The Hazards of the Korean People's Army without Clear Command and Control*

Any scenario involving the breakdown of the Kim regime creates grave concerns. Among the gravest concerns is the disposition and employment—intentional or inadvertent—of the KPA.⁴¹ The KPA's highly destructive weapons and North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, which includes nuclear warheads, could be used even if real-world conditions begged otherwise. These scenarios are further complicated by the numerous variables involved: intervention by China; ROK-U.S. OPCON considerations regarding operations in the North, the state of existing contingency plans, and the effectiveness of the U.S.-ROK military alliance; South Korea's political situation; involvement by the UN and NGOs; refugees and other humanitarian considerations; and the formation of factional groups in the North, each competing to fill the power vacuum.

This above list of factors represents just some of the variables that populate the full range of possibilities. Adding even more complexity to concerns over the disposition and employment of KPA forces is the vertical rigidity of North Korea's command and control system. As a means to control the KPA, information is rarely allowed to flow horizontally. Information generated at the bottom of the command chain flows up, and orders flow back down the chain. Little, if any, communication is shared among adjacent KPA units.⁴² In a scenario where the regime is destabilized, KPA units, lacking a supreme command and control node that issues orders downward, may have no other choice than to default to pre-built checklists and execute pre-assigned tasks with no regard to, and no understanding of, the real-world events going on around them. Cut off from information, these units could operate in a dangerously suboptimal manner, determining that the safest course of action is to implement pre-approved plans.

The high stakes involved over the disposition and employment of the KPA, along with the added complexity of numerous interacting variables, not only puts primacy on maintaining

40 For examples of scenarios that could occur involving a Kim regime collapse, see Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "Planning for the Future: Conditions of Combined ROK-U.S. Military Intervention in Potential DPRK Contingencies," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 24.4 (December 2012), 492, http://www.kida.re.kr/data/kjda/06_Bruce%20E_Bechtoll.pdf, accessed January 5, 2020; David S. Maxwell, "Catastrophic Collapse of North Korea: Implications for the United States Military," monograph prepared for the School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, Academic Year 1995-96, 5-15, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a314274.pdf>, accessed January 5, 2020; Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36.2 (Fall 2011), 87-89; see also Robert Collins' phases of North Korean collapse in Robert D. Kaplan, "When North Korea Falls," *The Atlantic* (October 2006), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/10/when-north-korea-falls/305228/>, accessed January 11, 2021

41 For an example scenario of complications that could result in a crisis in North Korea, see Robert Collins, *Denied from the Start: Human Rights at the Local Level in North Korea*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), 69.

42 Joseph S. Bermudez, "Information and the DPRK's Military and Power-Holding Elite," in Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, eds., *North Korean Policy Elites*, IDA Paper P-3903 (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, June 2004), I-S-2.

contingency plans that are well-coordinated and up to date, but also places prioritization on understanding the potential communication pathways capable of reaching KPA military forces in the event of a regime breakdown. This will be vital for establishing lines of emergency communication outside of broken-down regime channels to prevent the unnecessary employment of weaponry or force, prepare for complex humanitarian operations intended to provide assistance, and if needed, sustain internal defensive operations. Campaigns of information dissemination must be designed to inform KPA forces, down to the soldier level, of the real-world situation occurring outside North Korea, imminent or ongoing human rights violations targeting them, and humanitarian help that is on its way.

To achieve these objectives, it is first essential to understand Kim Jong-un's idiosyncratic approach to wielding power and control downward and throughout North Korea's monolithic system of autocratic rule. The system is sustained with a unique governing ideology and implemented through a unitary political faction—the KWP—to apply total control over North Korea's society. Designed to protect the Kim regime, suppress potential dissent, and block the flow of outside information from entering North Korea, this system has enabled the country to repeatedly muddle through crises. The next section closely examines Kim Jong-un's application of power through this system of control.

3. KIM JONG-UN'S MONOLITHIC REIGN AND THE THREE-PRONGED CAMPAIGN TO TIGHTEN THE PARTY'S GRIP

3.1. The Foundations of Kim Jong-un's Monolithic Control

3.1.1. *Suryong Concept*

Seated at the apex of North Korea's political, economic, military, and social systems is the *Suryong*—the “supreme leader”—with absolute authority over everything that goes on inside North Korea and whom everyone must obey. The current *Suryong*, Kim Jong-un, wields his power through a system of dynastic, autocratic rule based on Juche ideology and implemented through a single political faction. The *Suryong* concept was carefully honed from the late 1950s through the late 1960s to centralize power in a single supreme leader and vanquish the existing domestic, pro-China, and pro-Soviet factions that challenged Kim Il-sung's rule.⁴³

3.1.2. *Juche Ideology*

Juche is the doctrinal ideology the Kim regime has used to legitimize the *Suryong*'s omnipotence. Introduced by Kim Il-sung in a 1955 speech and officially recognized in November 1970 at the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Fifth Party Congress, *Juche* was officially declared North Korea's unique ruling ideology at the Sixth Party Congress of October 1980.

As the “Monolithic Ideology” of the Party, *Juche* emphasizes national, political, and military independence as well as economic self-sufficiency. In April 1974, Kim Il-sung also established the “Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology,” a prescriptive code for North Koreans to follow and obey. Combined with *Suryong* theory and *Juche* ideology, the “Ten Principles” gave him full control of North Korean society via the Party apparatus, justified one-man rule, and paved the way for dynastic power succession. All North Koreans must memorize and comply with the Ten Principles. This is demonstrated at the weekly *saenghwal chonghwa* (생활 총화), or “self-criticism” sessions, where North Koreans are required to demonstrate a rote understanding of these principles. Failure to comply can be viewed as treason. Adherence to the Ten Principles allows *Juche* ideology to bind the vertical relationship of the *Suryong*, the Party, and the masses.⁴⁴

3.1.3. *Songbun System of Class Division*

The *Songbun* system was developed to identify and eradicate potential factional threats and ensure the preservation of a monolithic system centered on the *Suryong*. In establishing the

43 Robert Collins, *Pyongyang Republic: North Korea's Capital of Human Rights Denial* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2016), 18–20; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017* (Seoul: Institute for Unification Education, 2017), 17–19; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2014* (Seoul: Institute for Unification Education, 2014), 28.d

44 Collins, *Pyongyang Republic: North Korea's Capital of Human Rights Denial*, 18–20, 25–26; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 17–19; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2014*, 31–32, 372, 399.

Songbun system, North Koreans were forced to undergo a rigorous citizen registration process until the early 1970s that divided the people into three social classes—the “core” or loyal class, the “wavering” class, and the “hostile” class. This class designation is assigned at birth and places an individual along a pre-destined life trajectory; housing, food, educational and occupation-related opportunities all depend on one’s assigned *songbun*. As might be expected, those assigned to the “core” or loyal class are the elite and can trace their lineage to those who have been loyal to the regime since the beginning—anti-Japanese fighters, Korean War veterans, farmers, peasants, and laborers. Members of the “wavering” class include laborers, farmers, and intellectuals who do not meet the high standards that are required to be part of the elite class. The “hostile” class includes the descendants of rich farmers and landowners, collaborators who helped the Japanese or sided with South Korea during the Korean War, and family members of political prisoners and defectors.⁴⁵

3.1.4. Primary Internal Security Organizations

The primary institutions that are charged with keeping a watchful eye on the masses to ensure their adherence to the Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology include the KWP’s Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the Ministry of Social Security (formerly the Ministry of People’s Security) and the Military Security Command (MSC). The OGD monitors and enforces loyalty to and compliance with Party ideology for every North Korean citizen down to the *inminban* (인민반), or neighborhood Party cell-level, using *saenghwal chonghwa* sessions as its primary tool of control, which everyone must attend in accordance with the Ten Principles. The MSS fulfills the role of Kim Jong-un’s political police force, monitoring for plots against the regime and adverse political trends while ensuring adherence to the Ten Principles. The Ministry of Social Security primarily monitors and controls adherence to the Party at the workplace. Finally, the MSC is focused on the KPA, embedding its security officers into military unit staff to monitor, detect, and eliminate any anti-regime activity among the unit. All security agencies are under the ultimate control of the OGD.⁴⁶

3.2. Tightening the Party Screw

3.2.1. Upshot of the Eighth Party Congress – “More Party”

North Korea’s highest deliberative body is the Congress of the KWP—the “Party Congress.” Between 1946 and 1980, Kim Il-sung convened six Party Congresses. The 1980 Party Congress was the last one held in North Korea until Kim Jong-un reinstated the forum in 2016. Under Kim Jong-un, the Party Congress is now avowedly back on a regular five-year cycle. Beginning with

45 Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea’s Social Classification System* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012), 1–4; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017* (Seoul: Institute for Unification Education, October 2017), 280, 282.

46 Robert Collins, *North Korea’s Organization and Guidance Department: The Control Tower of Human Rights Denial* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), 14, 88, 96, 102, 109, 111, 114–15; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 295.

the Seventh Party Congress in 2016 and every five years thereafter, the Congress starts with a large gathering of high-level KWP delegates and observers where the country's performance is assessed, charters are revised, strategic goals are set, and policy for the next five years is directed across, down, and throughout the Party apparatus. Between congresses, the Party Central Committee presides over policy implementation, operating through the OGD.⁴⁷ For his part, Kim Jong-un has conducted the Party Congress as a high-level *saenghwal chonghwa* session to expose failures in policy, hold officials accountable, and reinforce the Party apparatus' commitment to new policies.⁴⁸

The Eighth Congress of the KWP was held over an eight-day period, from January 5 to January 12, 2021, with 5,000 delegates and 2,000 observers in attendance—nearly 2,000 more attendees and three days longer than the five-day Seventh Party Congress in 2016.⁴⁹ On the opening day of the Eighth Party Congress, Kim Jong-un frankly admitted to his country's dire economic predicament. In an open acknowledgment of failure, he conceded that the regime's five-year plan, implemented in 2016, had fallen far short of its economic objectives “in almost all areas” and directed a requirement to correct the “flaws” in the system.⁵⁰ For the Party elites and observers in attendance, this would not have been a surprise. A few months prior, at a Party Central Committee plenary meeting in August 2020, Kim Jong-un acknowledged the failures of the five-year plan of 2016.

According to Kim, internal, external, and unexpected factors had prevented the accomplishment of the regime's goals.⁵¹ Indeed, Kim Jong-un had been quite vocal throughout 2020, airing his angst and denouncing his country's corruption and failed economic policies. While Kim's views over what constitutes “corruption” is subject to interpretation, what is clear is that international sanctions, sealed borders (ostensibly due to COVID-19), plummeting trade, and other factors—such as summer flooding—had choked the engines of North Korea's already sputtering economy. In his closing address at the Eighth Party Congress, Kim declared that “socialist economic construction is the most important revolutionary task that we need to focus on today with all our might.”⁵²

While Kim correctly identified the economy as an urgent policy priority, he made no mention of pragmatic, market-oriented, or reform-minded approaches as possible solutions.

47 “The Korean Workers' Party,” *KBS World Radio*, http://world.kbs.co.kr/special/northkorea/contents/archives/politics/korean_workers_party.htm?lang=e, accessed March 12, 2021; “Workers' Party of Korea,” *KBS World Radio*, http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&board_seq=377156, accessed March 12, 2021.

48 For a description of *saenghwal chonghwa* and an example of how Kim Jong-un used it during the 7th Party Congress in 2016, see Collins, *Denied from the Start*, 78–85.

49 Ruediger Frank, “Key Results of The Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part I of 2),” *38 North*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/key-results-of-the-eighth-party-congress-in-north-korea-part-1-of-2/>, accessed March 12, 2021.

50 Shim, “Kim Concedes Economic Shortfalls as Congress Opens,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 6, 2021.

51 Shim Kyu-Seok, “Kim Jong-un Makes Rare Admission of Economic Failure,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, August 20, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/08/20/national/northKorea/North-Korea-economy-failure/20200820185100410.html>, accessed March 13, 2021.

52 Ahn Jong-Sik, “Parsing what was noteworthy from Kim Jong Un's closing address,” translated by Vilde Olausen, *Daily NK*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/parsing-noteworthy-kim-jong-un-closing-address/>, accessed March 13, 2021.

Rather, he reverted to old practices, calling for a Party approach to fix the economy while stressing the need for self-sufficiency and self-reliance as key pillars for the five-year plan moving forward. In an apparent move to resuscitate stalled central manufacturing, Kim identified North Korea's indigenous metal and chemical industries as key drivers to support the Party's strategy for economic rejuvenation.⁵³ During a meeting of the SPA five days after the conclusion of the Eighth Party Congress, there was a substantial reshuffling of cabinet posts related to economic affairs. Six of eight vice premiers were replaced, including the ministers for the electric power, chemical, railway, and mining industries.⁵⁴ Within a month of the Eighth Party Congress, Kim Jong-un, already unhappy over the lack of progress with the economy under the new five-year plan, sacked his newly appointed Party Central Committee economic director, criticized officials for their lack of transparency in setting their economic goals, and called for more organizational and ideological consolidation of the Party.⁵⁵

In the first week of March 2021, Kim attended a four-day workshop for county and city-level Party officials to rally support for implementing the economic goals established during the Eighth Party Congress. Kim's emphasis on the Party was unequivocal: "The city and county-level Party committees must fulfill their mission and role evenly so that the entire Party, and projects of the state, perform well and overall development of our-style (sic) socialism can make progress."⁵⁶

Kim Jong-un's "more Party" solution to his country's economic distress further centralizes and more deeply exerts the Party apparatus down and across the local levels. It may also further exacerbate North Korea's economic situation. The North Korean regime has failed to deliver meaningful economic results. Ever-shrinking resources in an already sputtering state economy can have disastrous effects, particularly considering Kim's focus on obtaining results from the capital-intensive chemical and metal industries, which are expensive to run.

Should Kim's policy fail to achieve its targets, or worse, backfire, an atmosphere of deepening dissatisfaction and disillusionment among the North Korean people becomes a natural possibility. Less resources will be available to siphon off to satisfy the elite. Survival incentives will increase among the masses, causing many to risk "corrupt" means outside of state-approved mechanisms to maintain their livelihoods or meet work-related production quotas. Even worse for Kim, those who are disenchanted may become increasingly vulnerable to the temptations offered by the "reactionary" world outside of North Korea's borders. Perhaps

53 Frank, "Key Results of The Eighth Party Congress in North Korea (Part 1 of 2)," *38 North*, January 15, 2021.

54 Jung Da-Min, "North Korea Replaces Economy-Related Cabinet Members," *The Korea Times*, January 19, 2021, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/01/103_302658.html, accessed March 13, 2021.

55 Shim Kyu-Seok, "Kim Jong-un Blasts Officials, Orders Action on 5-year Plan," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, February 9, 2021; <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/02/09/national/northKorea/North-Korea-plenary-session-Workers-Party/20210209174500417.html>, accessed March 13, 2021; Jeong Yong-Soo and Esther Chung, "Kim Jong-un Lashes out About Economic Policy," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, February 14, 2021; <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/02/14/national/northKorea/Kim-Jongun-economic-policies-north-korea/20210214190100401.html>, accessed March 13, 2021.

56 Elizabeth Shim, "Kim Jong Un Takes Hands-on Approach to Improving Economy," *UPI*, March 5, 2021; https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/03/05/NKorea-Kim-Jongun-economy-workshop-NKorea/6491614963516/, accessed March 13, 2021; Yi Won-Ju, "N.K. Leader Calls on Local Party Officials to Bring 'Clear changes' for the People," *Yonhap News*, March 7, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210307001000325>, accessed March 13, 2021.

Kim has already contemplated these possibilities. Just prior to the Eighth Party Congress held in January, Kim Jong-un introduced a new and draconian law targeting those who might be tempted by outside information.

3.3. The Three-Pronged Campaign to Tighten the Party's Grip

3.3.1. Prong 1: The Anti-Reactionary Thought Law

On December 4, 2020, during the 12th Session of the 14th SPA, a new law was passed targeting individuals for the crime of “anti-reactionary thought.” The new anti-reactionary law forbids the use, storage, and distribution of foreign cultural content—radio broadcasts, recordings, video content, books, music, etc.—that is not state-approved. Under this law, such violations are punishable by up to death. It also bans the outflow of internal information that is produced inside North Korea.⁵⁷

The new “anti-reactionary law” appears to focus mostly on blocking South Korean, then U.S. and Japanese cultural inflow. Under Article 27, North Koreans caught with “films, recordings, publications, books, songs, drawings or photos” from South Korea are subject to a sentence of five to 15 years in a correctional labor camp. Those who are involved in the importation and distribution of the banned material get life sentences in a labor camp or are sentenced to death. Article 32 bans South Korean accents and singing styles. For the crime of speaking, singing, or writing like a South Korean, North Koreans receive up to two years of correctional labor. For North Koreans who use or distribute materials from the U.S., Japan or other “hostile countries,” Article 28 imposes 10 years of correctional labor or up to death for those who import “large” amounts of material. Article 29 punishes consumers of pornography with five to 15 years of correctional behavior and up to death for those that make, import, or distribute it. The law also stipulates that the parents of children who run afoul of the new rules receive harsh fines and can be exiled. In February 2021, a teenage boy reportedly caught watching pornography was punished along with his parents. According to reports, they were exiled from their home in Sinuiju to an unknown location in an outlying province.⁵⁸

57 Shim Kyu-Seok, “North Passes Laws Banning ‘Reactionary’ Thought,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 6, 2020; <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/12/06/national/northKorea/North-Korea-Presidium-Supreme-Peoples-Assembly/20201206171500562.html>, accessed March 10, 2021; Jang Seul-Kee, “A Deep Dive into N. Korea’s New ‘Anti-Reactionary Thought’ Law,” *Daily NK*, December 15, 2020; <https://www.dailynk.com/english/deep-dive-north-korea-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>, accessed March 10, 2021; Mun Sun-Bo, “Kim Jong Un’s True Intentions Were Revealed Through the Anti-Reactionary Thought Law,” *Daily NK*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-jong-un-true-intentions-revealed-through-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>, accessed March 10, 2021.

58 Jang Seul-Kee, “Exclusive: Daily NK Obtains Materials Explaining Specifics of New ‘Anti-Reactionary Thought’ Law,” *Daily NK*, January 19, 2021; <https://www.dailynk.com/english/exclusive-daily-nk-obtains-materials-explaining-specifics-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>, accessed March 10, 2021; Jang Seul-Kee, “Teenage Boy Caught Watching Pornography Exiled to Countryside with Family,” *Daily NK*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/teenage-boy-caught-watching-pornography-exiled-countryside-family/>, accessed March 10, 2021.

After passing the “anti-reactionary law” in December 2020 and announcing the tightening of Party control at the Eighth Party Congress in January 2021, Kim Jong-un used the Party Central Committee plenary meeting, held from February 8th to 11th, to roll out his vision of how to implement the new law. At the second session of the plenary meeting, he proposed strengthening efforts to fight anti-socialism and non-socialism. He also referred to the “revolutionary will and determination” required to surgically remove outside cultural “malignant tumors” from South Korea and elsewhere. To carry this out, he announced that he would organize a joint “command” from the center to the provinces, cities, and counties. He also declared that any managers from the working ranks who protect and foster anti-socialist and non-socialist activity would be eliminated. This was an apparent warning aimed at institutions and officials who have allowed those caught with outside information to avoid punishment through personal connections or bribes.⁵⁹

According to the *Daily NK*'s reports, a Senior Colonel in the 3d Corps was among the first high-level victims of the new law. On February 22, 2021, the senior officer was publicly executed for watching and possessing South Korean dramas and entertainment shows.⁶⁰ On March 2, a woman and three men who were guilty of distributing illegal videos were reportedly executed at a firing range in Pyongyang's Sadong District, in front of local residents and the heads of all the city's *inminban* neighborhood watch units. The group, led by a middle-aged couple, was accused of loading SD cards with South Korean entertainment content and distributing the cards across the country for profit. The couple had been running a small factory near their home that contained production equipment, along with 30 to 40 workers.⁶¹

As seen in the case of the Senior Colonel in the 3d Corps, the KPA is a target of the “anti-reactionary law.” On March 22, the General Political Bureau (GPB) reportedly declared that in accordance with the new anti-reactionary law introduced at the SPA in December 2020, a “great ideological battle” (대 사상전) was being waged to halt and eradicate the spread of the malignant tumor of South Korean culture into the KPA. Internal instructions had been sent down to every single unit in the KPA to launch an “ideological war.” A military source in North Hamgyong Province reportedly claimed that this battle was already underway. Sources claimed that despite countless efforts to prevent the spread of South Korean culture among military officials and soldiers, curiosity about South Korea was only intensifying.⁶²

Kim Jong-un's new “anti-reactionary law” is considerably more oppressive than existing provisions in North Korea's Criminal Law pertaining to outside cultural information, as published

59 Kim Gyeong-Yoon, “남영상 유포자 사형 · 간부도 처벌...北, 사상통제 고삐 꺾는다” [Death Sentence for Distributors of South Korean Videos, Punishment for Officials...North Korea Tightens the Reins of ‘Thought Control’], *Yonhap News*, February 16, 2021; <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20210216167200504>, accessed March 15, 2021.

60 Jeong Tae-Joo, “3군단 후방부장 공개처형...軍 ‘부르주아 사상문화 통제’ 첫 총성” [Public Execution of 3d Corps Rear Commander...Military is First Target of ‘Bourgeoisie Thought Control’], *Daily NK*, February 25, 2021, https://www.dailynk.com/_trashed-8/, accessed March 6, 2021.

61 Ha Yoon-Ah, “Four Publicly Executed in Pyongyang on Charges of Distributing ‘Illegal Video Materials,’” *Daily NK*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/four-publicly-executed-pyongyang-charges-distributing-illegal-video-materials/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

62 Lee Myeong-Cheol, “북, 군대내 남한 문화 차단 위해 사상전 전개” [North Korea Launches Ideological Warfare to Block South Korean Culture in the Military], *RFA*, March 23, 2021, https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/ne-lm-03232021085017.html, accessed March 25, 2021.

in December 2015.⁶³ The following articles are listed under “Chapter VI. Crimes of Violating Socialist Culture” from the *Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* (2015):

Article 183 (Importing and Disseminating Degenerate Culture)

A person who imports without authorization, creates, disseminates or illegally stores materials which reflect degenerate, erotic and vulgar content such as drawings, photographs, books, songs or films shall be sentenced to a term of short-term labour of less than 1 year. In cases where the importing, creation, dissemination or storage has happened several times or in a large amount, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of less than 5 years. *In grave cases, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of more than 5 years and less than 10 years.*

Article 184 (Committing Degenerate Acts)

A person who has seen or listened to reproduced acts which reflect degenerate, erotic and vulgar content such as drawings, photographs, books, songs or films shall be sentenced to a term of short-term labour of less than 1 year. In cases where the person has habitually committed the acts in the foregoing paragraph, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of less than 5 years. *In grave cases, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of more than 5 years and less than 10 years.*

Article 185 (Listening to Hostile Broadcasts and Collection, Storage, Dissemination of Hostile Goods)

A person who has listened to enemy broadcasts or collected, stored or disseminated hostile goods without a purpose against the nation shall be sentenced to a term of short-term labour of less than 1 year. In cases where the person has habitually committed the acts in the foregoing paragraph or has collected, stored or disseminated a large amount of hostile goods, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of less than 5 years. *In grave cases, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of more than 5 years and less than 10 years.*

Compared to these articles, the new “anti-reactionary law” is uniquely draconian on several levels. First, the new law places a stronger focus on South Korea. It targets consumers and distributors of South Korean content with stricter punishment. North Koreans caught with South Korean content can receive up to 15 years in a correctional labor camp while those behind import and distribution can be sentenced to death, whereas those who use or distribute materials from the U.S., Japan or other “hostile countries” receive 10 years of correctional labor or up to death

63 For an up-to-date analysis of North Korean laws since 2016, see Dae-Un Hong, “North Korean Laws Since 2016: What They Imply for the Country’s Future,” *38 North*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/north-korean-laws-since-2016-what-they-imply-for-the-countrys-future/>, accessed March 15, 2021.

in the case of importing large amounts of material. Second, the new law appears to cover a wider range of actions, including seemingly trivial infractions, targeting those who might be construed as writing, speaking, or singing like a South Korean. Third, the new law clearly targets South Korean cultural and entertainment content, while the previous legal language, which referred to “enemy broadcasts” and “hostile goods,” was less explicit. Fourth, the language of the new law allows for arbitrary application of punishment. It will be left up to interpretation as to what the definition of “large amounts” of outside information is when the regime decides whether to carry out the death penalty. This interpretation will also depend on whether the regime intends to use a particular case to signal the seriousness with which it intends to enforce the law. Last, and most obvious, is the severity of the new law. Previously, the gravest possible penalty for getting caught with outside content in each category of crimes “violating socialist culture” was from 5 to 10 years of labor, while the new “anti-reactionary law” imposes up to death.⁶⁴

3.3.2. *Prong 2: Kim Jong-un’s Targets of Corruption—Wrongdoers or Scapegoats?*

The new, ultra-draconian law is being carried out in combination with another key component—Kim Jong-un’s campaign to root out and punish “corruption.” On February 28, 2020, Kim Jong-un presided over an expanded KWP meeting. This meeting was a tense affair with a twofold purpose: to publicly root out corruption at the highest levels, and to underscore the seriousness of preventing the spread of COVID-19 into North Korea. Political Bureau members as well as cadres of the KWP Central Committee and other organizations were in attendance.

At the meeting, Kim called out power abuses and other corrupt acts committed by the OGD, along with a school that trained KWP cadres. As punishment, the Political Bureau dismissed Ri Man-gon, KWP Vice Chairman and OGD Director, and Pak Thae-dok, KWP Vice Chairman for Agriculture, from their posts. In addition, the KWP committee for Cadres’ Affairs Training was decommissioned, apparently due to corrupt practices and other irregularities perpetrated by some at the Kim Il-sung Higher Party School, North Korea’s pre-eminent training institution for KWP officials.⁶⁵

As Director of the OGD, Ri had been at the center of power in the KWP. He was directly involved in protecting the monolithic primacy of the regime and all of Kim Jong-un’s political and security equities, while ensuring that the Party apparatus was functioning efficiently down and across all agencies of government. Between 2016 and 2017, Ri had been responsible for overseeing scores of ballistic missile-launches and three nuclear tests as the KWP Military Industry Department Director. Because of his successes at these tasks, he ultimately became the OGD Director in April 2019. It is remarkable that he would be openly purged for anti-KWP acts of

64 “형법 2015” [Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2015)], translated by Da-Ye Gang, *Law and North Korea*, <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/>, accessed March 15, 2021.

65 “Political Bureau Meeting Held,” *North Korea Leadership Watch*, March 1, 2020, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/2020/03/01/political-bureau-meeting-held-2/>, accessed March 9, 2021; Park, Min-Hee, “Kim Jong-un Orders Special National “Anti-Epidemic Measures” to Halt Novel Coronavirus Infections,” *Hankyoreh*, March 2, 2020, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/930731.html, accessed March 9, 2021.

corruption after an apparent spotless career and his ascendant status in the Party.⁶⁶ In addition to publicly purging Ri and Pak, Kim Jong-un used the venue to order the national implementation of special anti-epidemic measures to prevent COVID-19 from entering North Korea. Kim warned that there would be serious consequences if the disease found its way into the country.⁶⁷

Kim Jong-un presided over another expanded KWP meeting several months later, convened for the purpose of calling out non-socialist infractions and re-emphasizing the seriousness of continued COVID-19 countermeasures. At the November 15, 2020 expanded Political Bureau meeting of the KWP's Seventh Central Committee, Kim ordered the continued vigilance and tightening of border-related COVID measures and used the venue to denounce the Pyongyang Medical University Party committee for a "serious crime." Other Party-affiliated departments and security organizations were also implicated in shielding and being complicit in this "crime." The nature of the crime committed at the Pyongyang Medical University—the country's top school of medicine—was not stated.⁶⁸ Speculation ranged from sexual abuse of female students by a group of male students—sons of Party Central Committee cadres—to the smuggling of supplies from South Korea, and finally to corruption involving entrance examinations and admissions.⁶⁹

3.3.3. Targeting Corruption in the KPA

At the 5th Plenary Session of the Seventh KWP Central Committee in December 2019, it was announced that a new organization would be formed to rein in corruption throughout the KPA. This organization—the Military Government Guidance Department (군정지도부)—was reportedly in operation by March 2020, with the authority to inspect the personal activities of military officers, including generals. It also has the power to monitor department heads within the

66 Tsutomu Nishioka, "Why Would Kim Jong Un Fire a Key North Korean Workers' Party Official?" *Japan Forward*, March 9, 2020, <https://japan-forward.com/speaking-out-why-would-kim-jong-un-fire-a-key-north-korean-workers-party-official/>, accessed March 9, 2021.

67 Park Min-Hee, "Kim Jong-un Orders Special National 'Anti-Epidemic Measures' to Halt Novel Coronavirus Infections," *Hankyoreh*, March 2, 2020, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/930731.html, accessed March 9, 2021.

68 Shim Kyu-Seok, "Kim Breaks Long Silence to Condemn 'Non-Socialist' Activities Within the Regime," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, November 16, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/11/16/national/northKorea/North-Korea-nonsocialist-KCNA/20201116173900416.html>, accessed March 9, 2021; Lee Je-Hun, "Kim Jong-un Intensifies Borders Controls and Lockdown Amid Global COVID-19 Resurgence," *Hankyoreh*, November 17, 2020, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/970345.html, accessed March 9, 2021.

69 Son Ryeong, "성적 안 되면 돈으로라도... 평양 의대도 '스카이 캐슬'" [If You Don't Have the Grades, Just Use Money...Pyongyang Medical School is 'Sky Castle' Too], *MBC News*, November 27, 2020, <https://imnews.imbc.com/replay/2020/nwdesk/article/5994452-32524.html>, accessed March 9, 2021; Ha Yoon-Ah, "N. Korean Authorities Bust Students at Pyongyang Medical University for 'Anti-Socialist Activity,'" *Daily NK*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-bust-students-pyongyang-medical-university-anti-socialist-activity/>, accessed March 9, 2021; Elizabeth Shim, "Report: Medical School in North Korea Smuggled in South Korean Supplies," *UPI*, November 18, 2020, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2020/11/18/Report-Medical-school-in-North-Korea-smuggled-in-South-Korean-supplies/4891605718052/, accessed March 9, 2021; Shim, "North Passes Laws Banning 'Reactionary' Thought," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 6, 2020.

As the pandemic persisted, authorities further intensified border control measures, creating buffer zones, deploying special forces to enforce these zones with orders to fire upon civilians and animals, and eventually ramping up efforts targeting defectors.

GPB. By March, officials from the new organization had been dispatched to KPA corps command headquarters to inspect officers, including corps commanders and subordinate division and brigade level officers, for the purpose of detecting potential adverse ideological trends.⁷⁰

In August 2020, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) confirmed that the Military Government Guidance Department had been newly established "to strengthen party control over the military." Choi Boo-il, a loyalist who had served as head of the Ministry of Social Security since 2013, had been reportedly appointed to lead this new organization.⁷¹ On January 11, 2021, the *Rodong Sinmun* officially announced the establishment of the Military Government Guidance Department, along with the appointment of Oh Il-jong as its head, apparently replacing Choi Boo-il. Oh is the son of Oh Jin-u, an important figure both symbolically as an anti-Japanese guerilla fighter who fought alongside Kim Il-sung, and historically for the role he played as North Korea's Minister of the People's Armed Forces and as a trusted high-level adviser to Kim Il-Sung.⁷²

The combination of the "anti-reactionary law" and Kim's anti-corruption campaign creates a pincer encirclement that tightens societal control. It dramatically increases the penalties imposed on North Koreans who access outside cultural material, and it also shuts down the ability for corrupt officials to enrich themselves with bribes that help perpetrators avoid punishment.

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- 70 Hyemin Son, "Kim Jong Un Makes New Secret Organization to Fight Military Corruption in North Korea," translated by Leejin Jun, edited by Eugene Whong, *RFA*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/gunjongjidobu-04132020171141.html>, accessed March 17, 2021.
- 71 Kim Hwan-Yong, "북한 노동당 내 '군정지도부' 신설...군부 통제 강화" [Establishment of Military Government Guidance Department within North Korea's Workers' Party...Strengthening Control Over the Military], *VOA*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.voakorea.com/korea/dprk-military>, accessed March 17, 2021.
- 72 Seo, Jae-Joon, "북한, 군 운영체계 재확립...군정지도부 중심으로 '현대화·고도화' 강화" [North Korea Re-establishes Military Management System... "Modernization" and "Advancement" Centered on Military Government Guidance Department), *News1*, January 11, 2021; <https://www.news1.kr/articles/?4177187>, accessed March 17, 2021; Ha Yoon-Ah, "Insight into Kim Jae Ryong and Oh Il Jong's New Appointments, and Kim Yo Jong's Current Status," *Daily NK*, February 10, 2021; <https://www.dailynk.com/english/insight-kim-jae-ryong-oh-il-jong-new-appointments-kim-yo-jong-current-status/>, accessed March 17, 2021.

3.3.4. Prong 3: Seal the Borders...and Shoot to Kill

There is an additional component to Kim Jong-un's strategy to ward off cultural inflow from the outside—stricter and more violent means to control the border. As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, Kim Jong-un began to implement a variety of measures that, while ostensibly intended to stop the pandemic from crossing into North Korea, also served to further tighten the Party's control over the masses. North Korean authorities began by taking steps to quickly seal the borders, clamp down on smuggling, reduce outside communication via Chinese mobile phones, and restrict domestic travel. As the pandemic persisted, authorities further intensified border control measures, creating buffer zones, deploying special forces to enforce these zones with orders to fire upon civilians and animals, and eventually ramping up efforts targeting defectors.

Despite claiming zero cases of COVID-19 within its territory, North Korea took immediate steps to seal its border less than a month after initial reports of the virus emerged from Wuhan, China. Proclaiming such actions as a matter of “national existence,” North Korea also coordinated the closure of its inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, effectively sealing the country from any contact with South Korea as well as China. Authorities also suspended freight shipment access to Sinuiju Port as well as train and air travel between North Korea and China.⁷³

In fact, North Korea had begun to tighten border security before COVID-19 first emerged in Wuhan. The MSS was reportedly conducting patrols using special units deployed along the Sino-North Korean border as early as December 2019. Small groups of four or five were deployed along with regular patrol units to monitor roads and man guard posts to control the flow of information and prevent smuggling. These measures appeared to target the relationship between regular patrol units and North Koreans engaging in smuggling of goods and money remittance operations.⁷⁴

By February 2020, security was strengthened further, with the MSS ordering border patrol units to “apply military law” by cracking down on non-state sanctioned “smuggling, trafficking and trading” and treating such unapproved activity as “anti-socialist activity” or as “benefiting the enemy.”⁷⁵ The following month, the North Korean campaign against “anti-socialist” activity intensified when the MSS led a large-scale operation to track down smugglers, brokers, and dealers involved with South Korean products.⁷⁶ Despite these enhanced efforts to seal the border, defection attempts continued in some areas, inviting criticism by North Korean authorities of

73 Ahn So-Young, “North Korea Suspends All Air, Train Links to China,” *VOA*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/north-korea-suspends-all-air-train-links-china>, accessed March 22, 2021; Mun Dong-Hui, “N. Korea Shuts Down Sinuiju Port Amid Coronavirus Fears,” *Daily NK*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-shuts-down-sinuiju-port-amid-coronavirus-fears/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

74 Kang Mi-Jin, “N. Korea Deploys Special Patrols to Sino-North Korean Border,” *Daily NK*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-deploys-special-patrols-sino-north-korean-border/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

75 Jeong Tae-Joo, “N. Korea Uses Military Law to Punish Smuggling on Border,” *Daily NK*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-uses-military-law-punish-smuggling-border/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

76 Jang Seul-Kee, “N. Korea Cracks Down on Smugglers of South Korean Goods,” *Daily NK*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-cracks-down-smugglers-south-korean-goods/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

MSS officials and prompting warnings to border patrols suspected of accepting bribes in exchange for cooperating with brokers and defectors attempting to cross the border. Responding to the added scrutiny, MSS officials stepped up anti-defection activity by holding daily meetings with neighborhood-level *inminban* leaders to actively track the whereabouts of potential defectors.⁷⁷

While efforts to control North Korea's borders were ongoing, lockdowns were occurring throughout the country. In February 2020, movement was completely restricted in and out of Sinuiju, located opposite the Chinese city of Dandong, and Uiju and Ryongchon counties, located along the Sino-North Korean border.⁷⁸ In mid-July, after the coronavirus was reportedly detected among some goods at Nampo Port, a ban was placed on further entry of freight. Concurrently, a "Lock Down Command" (sic) was created to "manage lock downs near bridges on the border, at ports, and at train stations, along with a directive to further increase disease control measures at the country's borders and coastal regions." The 'Lock Down Command' was ordered to engage with party committees located throughout North Korea to report and enforce Party policies.⁷⁹ In the same month, Kaesong was placed under a three-week lockdown after a North Korean man who had previously defected to South Korea managed to sneak back into the North. Authorities declared an emergency lockdown after he reportedly showed symptoms of COVID-19.⁸⁰ Similarly, the cities of Samjiyon and Hyesan, both located in Ryanggang Province in the country's northeast, were completely locked down after a woman who was living in China slipped back over the border into Samjiyon.⁸¹

As the pandemic persisted through the summer, North Korean authorities further intensified border control measures. Addressing an online conference in September 2020, General Robert Abrams provided a summary of North Korea's border campaign. The ongoing border shutdown, according to the Commander of U.S. Forces Korea, limited the supply of smuggled goods, resulting in an increase in demand and the need for North Korean authorities to establish a one-to-two kilometer buffer zone up to the border and deploy special operations forces with "shoot-to-kill orders."⁸² On August 25, 2020, the Ministry of Social Security posted a public order designating "strict zones within one to two kilometers of the border" and warned that unauthorized people or animals entering the zones would be fired upon unconditionally. Along

77 Kim Yoo-Jin, "N. Koreans Still Defecting Across the Border in Ryanggang Province," *Daily NK*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-still-defecting-across-border-ryanggang-province/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

78 Mun Dong-Hui, "N. Korea Shuts Down Transit in and out of Sinuiju," *Daily NK*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-shuts-down-transit-in-out-sinuiju/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

79 Kim Yoo-Jin, "Source: N. Korean Authorities Order 'Lock Down' of Nampo Port Following Detection of COVID-19," *Daily NK*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/source-north-korean-authorities-order-lock-down-nampo-port-detection-covid-19/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

80 Sang-Mi Cha, "North Korea Lifts Lockdown in Town after Suspected Coronavirus Case," *Reuters*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-northkorea-idUSKCN25A044>, accessed March 22, 2021.

81 Ha Yoon-Ah, "Samjiyon and Hyesan Locked Down after Woman Crosses Border," *Daily NK*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/samjiyon-hyesan-locked-down-after-woman-crosses-over-border/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

82 "North Korea Issues Shoot-to-Kill Orders to Prevent Virus: USFK," *The Korea Times*, September 11, 2020, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/09/103_295859.html, accessed March 22, 2021.

with the establishment of the buffer zones, about 3,000 troops from the elite “Storm Corps” and Seventh Corps from North Korea’s interior were deployed along the Sino-North Korean border.⁸³ By November 30, anti-aircraft artillery battalions from the 9th Corps were reportedly deployed to areas along the border in the city of Hoeryong, Onsong and Musan Counties, and Ryanggang Province. The camouflaged, combat-ready forward positions taken up by the anti-aircraft gunners represented a drastic addition to the special forces, which had already been deployed to supplement and monitor the border guards.⁸⁴

By January 2021, it appeared that the reach of the MSS and Ministry of Social Security was extending deeper into the local district offices to strengthen surveillance and control through the local *inminban*. District offices in North Hamgyong reportedly issued orders that flowed to the *inminban*, aimed at regulating local-level conduct during the ongoing COVID pandemic. These measures include requirements to report all movement of people and animals, no matter how trivial, and to confine teens and small children to their homes, except for an hour of daily outdoor exercise for students directly in front of their homes. In addition, the orders prohibited unapproved street vending at local markets, where guard posts were installed to monitor activity, and made mandatory the daily 9:00 AM reporting of body temperatures by all residents, either at their respective workplaces or through medical checks at home conducted by local hygiene officials.⁸⁵ Despite these increased measures, illegal border activity continued. Beginning on February 3, 2021, authorities reportedly ordered lockdowns of Chasong and Manpo, both located in Jagang Province, due to smuggling and defection attempts. The lockdowns were intended to remain in effect until March 7, but authorities lifted the order due to starvation cases involving military family members. These occurred in the homes of military officers who had been restricted to base and were unable to return to their dwellings to provide assistance.⁸⁶

Despite tougher border control measures, defections continued, although reduced in number. As a result, officials from the MSS were reportedly ordered to work with the Ministry of Social Security and the public security apparatus in China to track down and arrest defectors. Officials were instructed to bring those attempting to defect to South Korea to MSS counterespionage

83 Kang Mi-Jin, “Large Number of Storm Corps Troops Sent to Sino-North Korean Border,” *Daily NK*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/large-number-storm-corps-troops-sent-sino-north-korean-border/>, accessed March 22, 2021; Ha Yoon-Ah, “New Contingent of “Storm Corps” Sent to Sino-N. Korean Border,” *Daily NK*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/new-contingent-storm-corps-sent-sino-north-korean-border/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

84 Sewon Kim, “North Korea Sends Anti-Aircraft Units to Chinese Border to Stop Illegal Border Crossers,” translated by Leejin Jun, *RFA*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/border-12022020201044.html>, accessed March 23, 2021.

85 Lee Chae-Un, “Local District Offices Take on More Surveillance and Monitoring Duties Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Daily NK*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/local-district-offices-more-surveillance-monitoring-duties-amidst-covid-19-pandemic/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

86 Ha Yoon-Ah, “North Korean Authorities Lockdown Cities in Chagang Province over COVID-19 Fears,” *Daily NK*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-lockdown-cities-chagang-province-over-covid-19-fears/>, accessed March 23, 2021; Ha Yoon-Ah, “North Korea Lifts Lockdowns in Chagang Province’s Chasong and Manpo,” *Daily NK*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-lifts-lockdowns-chasong-manpo-chagang-province/>, accessed March 23, 2021.

offices located along the Sino-North Korean border for interrogation.⁸⁷ Additional tactics reportedly being used by the MSS to get would-be defectors in China to return to North Korea include a mixture of threats in the form of intimidation, and inducements, such as promises to overlook the would-be defector's transgressions, if they agree to come back.⁸⁸ There has also been a crackdown on the use of Chinese mobile phones. In October 2020, *Daily NK* reported that MSS officials began pressuring smugglers and brokers to give up their foreign-made mobile phones by December. Officials approached suspected mobile phone owners, offering to forgive past crimes if the devices were promptly turned in. The campaign to scoop up the phones was aimed at targeting calls to South Korea and China.⁸⁹ Efforts to eradicate the phones continued through November. After an uptick in remittance brokers getting caught along the border, local-level lectures were held in Ryanggang Province, threatening punishment for those using Chinese-made mobile phones.⁹⁰

3.4. Conclusion

For Kim Jong-un, the Eighth Party Congress of January 2021 served both as a KWP Central Committee-level *saenghwal chonghwa* “self-criticism” session and a launch vehicle for a nationwide political campaign. In an open admission of North Korea's deepening economic quagmire, Kim began the Congress by admitting to the failures of his regime's previous five-year plan to improve the economy. He then announced a “more Party” approach to fix the economy, while stressing the need for self-sufficiency and self-reliance as key pillars for the new five-year plan. He concluded the Congress by firing a warning shot across the bow of the Party apparatus, notifying officials suspected of corruption that they would be the new targets of ideological accountability.

Shortly after the Party Congress, Kim Jong-un mobilized the Party apparatus, exerting it more deeply down and across the local levels in a three-pronged campaign to block the flow of outside information into North Korea, crack down on so-called corrupt officials, and tightly seal the borders. As an essential element of the regime's power apparatus, the KPA is affected by each prong in this campaign of intensifying control, which adds even greater constriction to an already rigid command structure. This makes it important to understand the vertical command-and-control relationship between the KPA and the supreme leader. The next section will zoom in on this relational structure.

87 Kim Yoo-Jin, “N. Korean Authorities Order State Security Agency to ‘Secretly’ Arrest Defectors Overseas,” *Daily NK*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-order-state-security-agency-secretly-arrest-defectors-overseas/>.

88 Jeong Tae-Joo, “North Korean Authorities are Encouraging Defectors in China to Return Home,” *Daily NK*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-authorities-encouraging-defectors-china-return-home/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

89 Kim Yoo-Jin, “N. Korea Pressures Some Border Residents to Hand in Foreign Cell Phones,” *Daily NK*, October 16, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-pressures-some-border-residents-hand-in-foreign-cell-phones/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

90 Kang Mi-Jin, “N. Korea Continues Crackdown on Use of Chinese-Made Mobile Phones,” *Daily NK*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-continues-crackdown-chinese-made-mobile-phone-use/>, accessed March 22, 2021.

4. FROM SURYONG TO SOLDIER: THE STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION OF THE KOREAN PEOPLE'S ARMY

North Korea is extraordinarily militarized. Despite its relatively small population of 25 million, the KPA fields the world's fourth largest military force. Over a million individuals serve in the active duty ranks of the country's extensive ground-centric military organization, which includes special operations, air, naval, strategic, and reserve units.⁹¹ Training, equipping, and garrisoning this massive human assemblage comes with an equally gargantuan cost. Kim Jong-un spends almost a quarter of his country's paltry gross domestic product (GDP) annually on military expenditures, placing North Korea highest among 169 countries, according to an annual unclassified U.S. State Department report. By contrast, U.S. defense spending stands at 4.2% of GDP and South Korea's defense spending takes up 2.6% of its GDP.⁹²

North Korea also trains and equips over seven million reserve and paramilitary forces that are subject to mobilization. With few exceptions, all North Korean males are required to register for military enlistment by the age of 14. They begin their service after graduating from secondary school.⁹³ About six percent of the country's population serves on active duty, with an additional 25 to 30 percent serving in the reserves.⁹⁴ Remarkably, KPA military personnel make up nine percent of the country's total labor force—an enormous percentage compared to other countries. For example, as of 2018, Russia's armed forces comprised 2% of its labor force while the U.S. and China stood at 0.8% and 0.3% respectively.⁹⁵

While South Korea's (Republic of Korea, or ROK) Ministry of National Defense (MND) surmises that North Korea maintains a conventional military strategy centered on guerrilla, hybrid, and blitzkrieg-style warfare, the country is also continuing to enhance its asymmetric capabilities with nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, missiles, long-range artillery, submarines, special operations, and cyber warfare. Since May 2019, North Korea has test-launched new solid-fuel based short-range ballistic missiles and continues to enhance the technological capabilities of its 6,800 cyber warfare personnel.⁹⁶

91 U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2017," Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 15, 2017), 9.

92 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, "World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2019," <https://2017-2021.state.gov/world-military-expenditures-and-arms-transfers-2019/index.html>, accessed March 4, 2021. *The Wall Street Journal* reports similar State Department data. See Dasl Yoon and Andrew Jeong, "A North Korean Defector's Tale Shows Rotting Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-north-korean-defectors-tale-shows-rotting-military-11593867607>, accessed March 4, 2021.

93 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 130, 134.

94 U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2017," 9.

95 Robert Collins makes this point using 2016 data in *Denied from the Start*, 64. See updated 2018 data reported by the World Bank, "Armed forces personnel (% of total labor force) - Korea, Dem. People's Rep.," https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.TF.ZS?locations=KP&most_recent_value_desc=true, accessed February 27, 2021.

96 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020* (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 2020), 23.

The ROK MND expects that, in the event of a contingency, North Korea would likely attempt guerilla attacks with asymmetric forces to establish favorable conditions that would lead to an early conclusion of the war.⁹⁷ Asymmetric capabilities do indeed appear to be a key focus. While visiting the site of a new submarine under construction in July 2019, Kim Jong-un expressed satisfaction that the submarine would be capable of implementing the “strategic military intention” of the Party.⁹⁸ As of 2020, Kim has also reiterated plans for strengthening North Korea’s artillery capability. Moving forward, the ROK MND concludes that North Korea will likely continue adjusting its military strategy while accounting for the country’s economic difficulties and changes to its external strategic environment.⁹⁹

4.I. North Korean Military Command Structure

4.I.I. *The Suryong*

As the *Suryong*, or “supreme leader,” Kim Jong-un wields absolute authority over the state, party, and military. This extraordinary power is exercised through a hierarchical structure that allows the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) to guide and control the implementation of all state policies while sustaining Kim’s totalitarian rule. The magnitude and reach of Kim’s power cannot be overstated. As the supreme leader, he has absolute authority over the Party. In turn, the Party is tasked with mobilizing the public to accomplish objectives that are established in accordance with policies that are implemented through state institutions. This system allows Kim Jong-un to enjoy complete, unmitigated control over the KPA, down to the individual soldier.¹⁰⁰

From an organizational standpoint, Kim’s absolute control over the KPA extends from two organs of power—the KWP and the State Affairs Commission (SAC), both of which he was named chairman of in 2016. First, at the Seventh Party Congress in May of that year, Kim was named Chairman of the KWP and following this, he became Chairman of the SAC at the Fourth Session of the 13th SPA in June. The SAC is the highest office among central state institutions in North Korea. As SAC Chairman, Kim has direct control over all state projects, including national defense.¹⁰¹ Article 102 of North Korea’s constitution specifies the SAC Chairman as “the supreme commander of the armed forces” who “commands and controls all the armed forces of the State.”¹⁰²

97 Ibid, 23.

98 Ibid, 23; see also Jeong Yong-Soo and Lee Sung-Eun, “Kim Shows off His New Submarine,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, July 23, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2019/07/23/politics/Kim-shows-off-his-new-submarine/3065903.html>, accessed February 27, 2021.

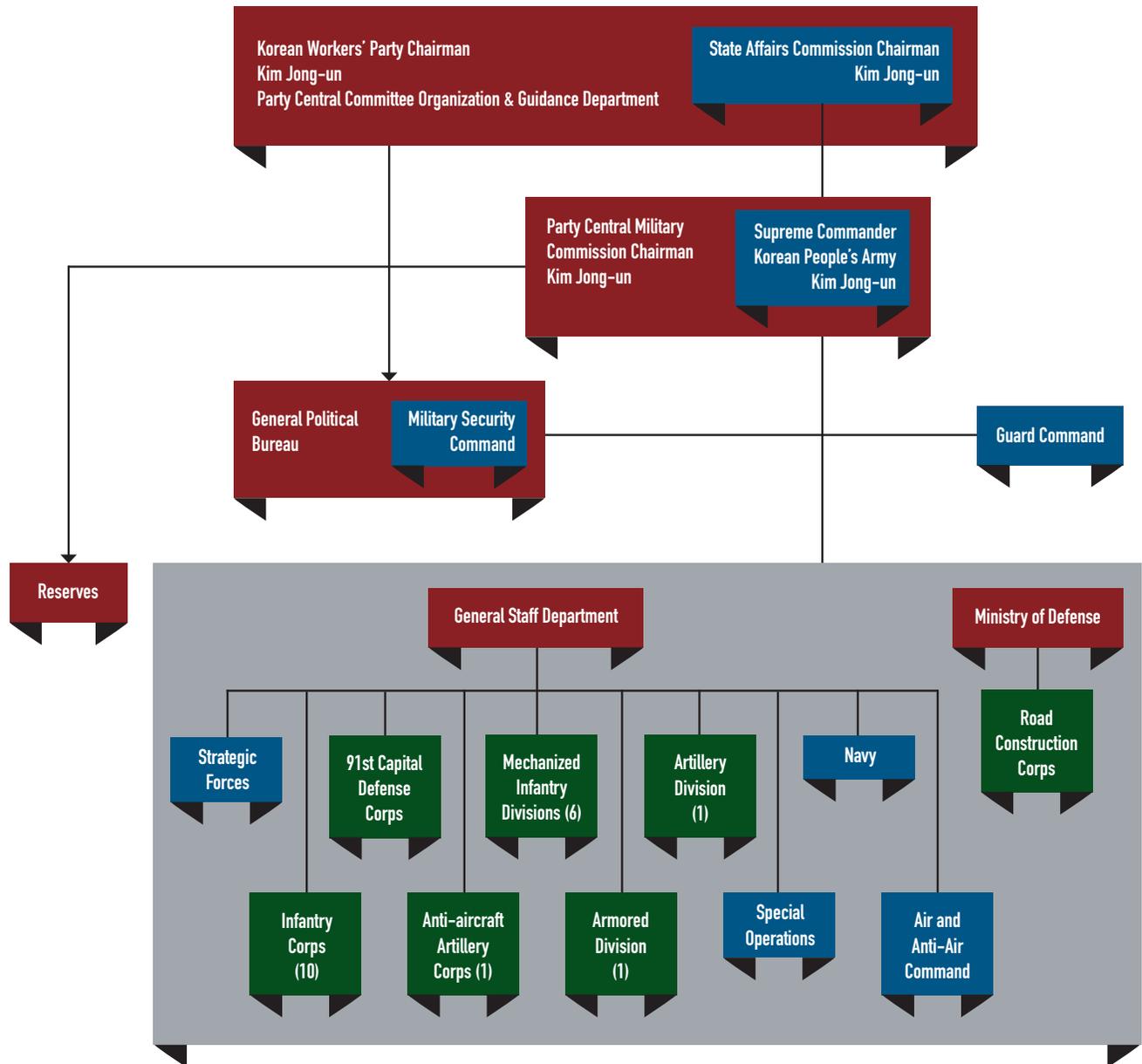
99 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 23.

100 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 39, 51, 61.

101 Ibid, 73, 74, 88, 132.

102 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020* (Seoul: Institute for Unification Education, 2019), 129.

Figure 1. KPA Military Command Structure¹⁰³



103 Author's rendition of the KPA command structure; primary sources used to develop the figure include Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, and Collins, *North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department: The Control Tower of Human Rights Denial*.

4.1.2. *Party Central Committee*

During intervals between Party congresses, the Party Central Committee (CC) serves as North Korea's highest guiding body. The CC is comprised of members elected at the Party Congress. They include senior leaders from across North Korea's Party and state institutions, from the Party Chairman to Party department directors to high-ranking military officers. As a convening body, the CC is required to hold a plenary meeting at least once annually and each member is required to attend.¹⁰⁴ The Party CC plenary sessions serve as an important, high-level venue where strategic, overarching policy decisions are synchronized among North Korea's elite senior leaders for comprehensive implementation.

For example, the Party CC plenary session that was held on March 31, 2013 adopted the *byungjin* line, calling for the dual pursuit of economic and nuclear force development. Then, through the first Party CC plenary session of the Seventh Congress held on May 9, 2016, organizational adjustments to the SAC and the Central Military Commission were implemented. Following this, on October 7, 2017, the second Seventh Congress plenary session was held, wherein there was continued emphasis on promoting the *byungjin* line and overcoming sanctions through self-reliance. On April 20, 2018, the third plenary session declared victory for the *byungjin* line and introduced a "new strategic line" focusing on economic construction. At the fourth plenary session on April 10, 2019, the CC directed full mobilization to achieve the goals of the 2020 Five-Year Strategy and strengthen the role of state organizations toward the direction of party-state unity. Finally, at the fifth plenary session held from December 28 to 31, 2019, the CC emphasized the preservation of sovereignty through the right to survive by strengthening national defense in the face of prolonged sanctions.¹⁰⁵

4.1.3. *Party Central Military Commission*

Within the KWP, Kim Jong-un holds the chairmanship of the Party Central Military Commission (CMC). Thus, in addition to holding operational command of the KPA, Kim controls and monitors all military administrative affairs through Party channels.¹⁰⁶ The Party CMC is the highest military organization within the KWP. Article 29 of the KWP Charter stipulates that the functions and status of the CMC are "[to provide] party organizational guidance on all projects in the military realm between party congresses, resolve debates over measures to carry out the party's military line and policies, and (to provide) party guidance on general national defense projects, including projects for strengthening revolutionary forces and developing military industries."¹⁰⁷

104 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 69, 133; and Collins, *North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department*, 59.

105 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 53-54.

106 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 69, 133.

107 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 128.

4.1.4. *Role of the Organization and Guidance Department*

As it would appear on North Korea's KWP organizational chart, the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) is seemingly one of the many departments arrayed under the KWP CC. However, as Robert Collins notes, the OGD's "influence far exceeds all other departments within the Party. The OGD is the heart of the KWP."¹⁰⁸ As such, the OGD's omnipresent oversight and control seeps across all KPA organizations in a variety of ways. OGD directorates, sections, and subsections dictate the Party-related activities of military units. The OGD also scrutinizes personnel matters involving military officers and controls their career advancement. Officer effectiveness, loyalty, and adherence to the Party line is assessed and submitted to the supreme leader in consolidated reports. OGD-controlled Party committees embedded in the military also generate, consolidate, and submit situational reports to the supreme leader. The OGD controls the KPA through the General Political Bureau.¹⁰⁹

4.1.5. *The General Political Bureau*

The General Political Bureau (GPB) implements all KPA Party Committee decisions through directives to the KPA. It acts under the control of the OGD. A Political Department staffed by GPB officers exists at each level of the KPA. In addition, GPB-assigned political officers are deployed to KPA units at every level. These officers are responsible for controlling political tasks and ensuring their alignment with KWP policies.¹¹⁰ Because the GPB oversees the various Party committees throughout the KPA and manages their political activities, the GPB enjoys a higher status than the General Staff Department and the Ministry of Defense [name changed from "Ministry of Peoples Armed Forces" (MPAF) to "Ministry of Defense" in October 2020].¹¹¹ According to Collins, it is the GPB Director's Party affiliation within the structure of the Kim regime that gives the GPB added influence and control over the General Staff Department and the Ministry of Defense.¹¹²

4.1.6. *Military Security Command*

The Military Security Command (MSC) is responsible for dealing with criminal activities in the KPA, including investigations, preliminary hearings, and even executions. The MSC surveils KPA personnel and monitors the movement of KPA units to track down and punish spies and those involved in dissident activities. While the OGD controls the MSC through the GPB,

108 Collins, *North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department*, 2; see also "[Figure 2-1] Workers' Party Organs" in Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 57.

109 Collins, *North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department*, 36, 41, 42, 44, 88, 92.

110 Ibid, 92.

111 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 71; see Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 53–54.

112 Collins, *North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department: The Control Tower of Human Rights Denial*, 95.

Kim Jong-un, as the supreme commander of the military, also issues direct orders to the MSC.¹¹³ Similar to the GPB, the MSC is deployed throughout the KPA at each level of command.¹¹⁴

4.1.7. *Party-Security-Military Redundant System of Oversight and Reporting in the KPA*

As described above, the commander is flanked on each side by two separate chains of oversight at each unit level of the KPA. On one side of the military commander is the political officer. GPB-assigned political officers are deployed to KPA units at every level. At the higher levels, such as the division and regiment-level, political commissars preside over Party committees. At the lower levels, such as battalions, companies, and platoons, political directive officers are assigned to departments, party cells, and subgroups.¹¹⁵ On the other side of the military commander is the MSC security officer. As Collins notes, this creates what is, in effect, a “triple reporting system”—on one side, a GPB political chain, on the other, an MSC anti-coup chain of surveillance, and in the middle, a standard military chain of command. Each chain reports separately up to the OGD. This creates a tremendous burden on the military commander, who must ensure that his or her report is consistent with the other two sets of reports.¹¹⁶ Conversely, looking down the chain of command, for military officers to implement orders to their units, the political officer must co-sign directives before they can take effect.¹¹⁷

4.1.8. *Guard Command*

The Guard Command is responsible for the security of Kim Jong-un and his family as well as the protection and management of Kim’s residences and other key facilities in Pyongyang. The Guard Command is also charged with protecting other high-ranking members of the KWP. It is trained and equipped to suppress coup attempts.¹¹⁸

4.1.9. *General Staff Department*

The General Staff Department (GSD) has bounded command authority over the military operations of the five branches of the KPA—ground, special operations, naval, air and anti-air, and strategic forces.¹¹⁹ In this regard, the GSD executes the supreme leader’s command authority, as it leads all KPA forces within the bounds and under the thorough leadership of the Party. The GSD commands and directs subordinate units by establishing and executing war and peacetime

113 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 132; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 133; Collins, *North Korea’s Organization and Guidance Department*, 96.

114 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 138; Collins, *North Korea’s Organization and Guidance Department*, 97.

115 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 135, 138-39.

116 Collins, *North Korea’s Organization and Guidance Department*, 98.

117 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 140.

118 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 132; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 133.

119 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 24. The author added “bounded” to highlight the limits of this command authority.

operations and training plans for respective military headquarters, as well as for units and training centers at each level. It also participates in the preparation of orders issued annually by the Supreme Commander.¹²⁰

4.1.10. Ministry of Defense

The Ministry of Defense (MOD) represents the KPA externally and is responsible for military diplomacy, logistics, and finance.¹²¹ While it appears on paper that the MOD is equal in status to the GPB and GSD as a military command organization, its role is limited to that of exercising administrative and logistical tasks. While the GPB exercises substantive military authority through its responsibility over the military's Party organization, political affairs, and personnel affairs, the MOD is only responsible for the "rear area" tasks of supplying food, clothing, fuel, and medical care for soldiers.¹²²

4.2. Mission of the KPA

In North Korea, where Kim Jong-un runs state affairs through the Party, the most important issue is wholehearted solidarity (일심단결), centered on the safety of the supreme leader and the KWP. Within this context, the KPA's role is to defend the regime as the "Army of the Party," the "Army of the Revolution," and the "Army of the Supreme Leader."¹²³ North Korea's constitution, amended last in August 2019, codifies this mission, with newly revised emphasis on the defense of the Party.

Chapter 4 (National Defense) of North Korea's constitution, revised in August 2019, contains the following four articles (translated, with changes in italics):¹²⁴

Article 58: The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is shored up by the all-people, nationwide defense system."¹²⁵

120 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 131.

121 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 24; Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2018* (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, 2018), 28.

122 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 131-32.

123 Ibid, 118.

124 Author compared language from the 2016 constitution with the amended 2019 version; see "조선민주주의인민공화국 사회주의헌법 (2019. 8. 개정)" [Democratic Republic of Korea Socialist Constitution, amended August 2019], 9-10, and "조선민주주의인민공화국 사회주의헌법" [Democratic Republic of Korea Socialist Constitution], 7. Text obtained from Unification Law Database, "Democratic People's Republic of Korea Socialist Constitution," https://www.unilaw.go.kr/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?bbsId=BBSMSTR_000000000021&bbsSubId=&ntId=235, accessed February 20, 2021.

125 Article 58 is unchanged from the 2016 version of the constitution. See "Korea (Democratic People's Republic of)'s Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 2016," *Constitute Project*, 12, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Peoples_Republic_of_Korea_2016.pdf?lang=en, accessed February 19, 2021.

Article 59: The mission of the armed forces of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is *to defend to the death the Party Central Committee led by the great comrade Kim Jong-un* and safeguard the interests of the working people, while defending the socialist system, gains made by the revolution, freedom and independence of the fatherland and peace from foreign invasion.¹²⁶

Article 60: The State, on the basis of politically and ideologically arming the *people and soldiers of the Korean Peoples’ Army*, shall achieve the lines of military self-defense by modernizing and ‘cadrefying’ the entire military (전군간부화), arming all the people, and fortifying the entire country.^{127, 128}

Article 61: The State shall establish a revolutionary command system and military climate, strengthen military and mass disciplines in the army, and give full play to the noble traditional traits of unity between officers and men, combination of the military and political work and unity between the army and the people.¹²⁹

4.3. KPA Force Disposition

The KPA is comprised of five subordinate component branches. As mentioned above, the GSD has direct, albeit bounded, command authority over the military operations of the five KPA branches—ground, special operations, naval, air and anti-air, and strategic forces. KPA forces consist of 1.28 million active troops: 1.1 million ground; 110,000 air and anti-air; 60,000 naval; and 10,000 strategic force personnel. In addition to these active forces, there are roughly 7.62 million reserve forces. These reserve forces consist of the following: 5.7 million worker-peasant red guards; one million red youth guards; 600,000 reserve military training units; and 400,000 paramilitary units.¹³⁰

126 The italicized portion represents the amended part of Article 59. The 2019 version changed to “to defend to the death the Party Central Committee led by the great comrade Kim Jong-un” (위대한 김정은동지를 수반으로 하는 당중앙위원회를 결사옹위하고). This replaced “protect the leaders of the revolution by achieving the military-first revolutionary line” (선군혁명로선을 관철하여 혁명의 수뇌부를 보위하고) from the 2016 version.

127 The italicized portion represents the amended part of Article 60. The 2019 version changed to “on the basis of politically and ideologically arming the people and soldiers of the Korean Peoples’ Army” (인민들과 인민군장병들을 정치사상적으로 무장시키는 기초 위에서). This replaced “on the basis of politically and ideologically arming the military and the people” (군대와 인민을 정치사상적으로 무장시키는 기초 위에서) from the 2016 version.

128 Article 60 has its origins in the “Four-Point Military Guidelines” adopted in December 1962 during the Fifth Plenary Meeting of the Fourth KWP Central Committee and later codified in the 1992 constitution, where the guidelines remain. See Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 129.

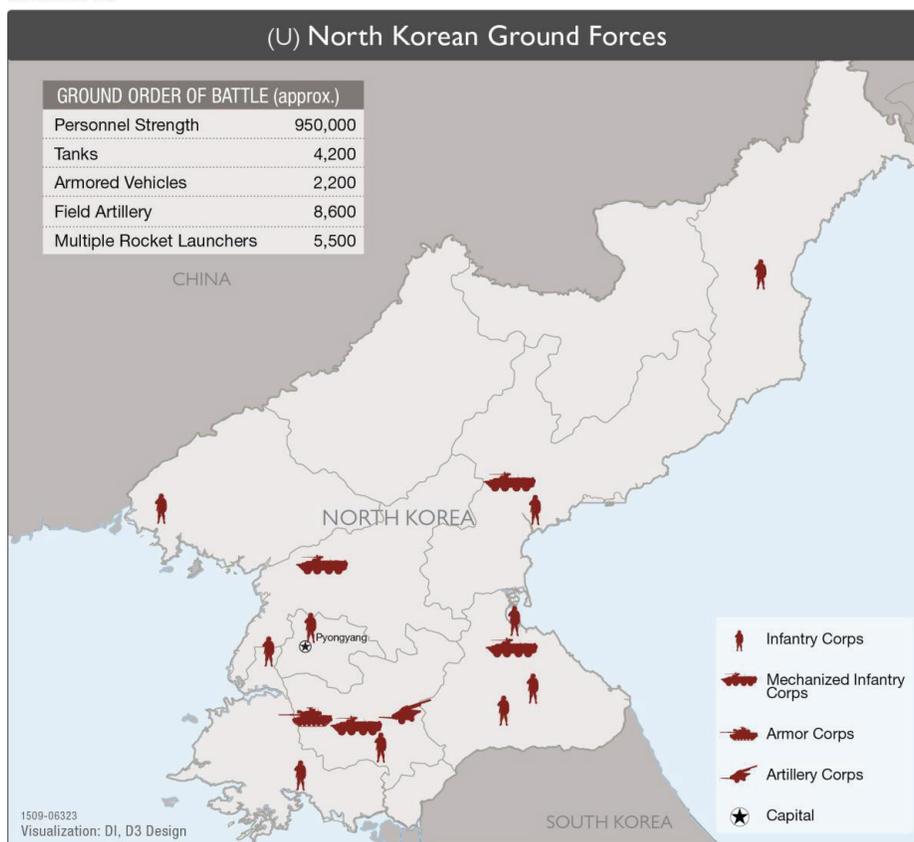
129 Article 61 is unchanged from the 2016 version of the constitution. See “Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of)’s Constitution of 1972 with Amendments through 2016,” *Constitute Project*, 12.

130 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 132–33.

4.4. Ground Forces

Made up of roughly 1.02 million active duty and 600,000 reserves, KPA ground forces represent the largest branch of the KPA. To conduct sustained operations, the ground forces rely on the mobilization of reserve and militia.¹³¹ KPA ground forces consist of 10 regular infantry front and rear corps, the 91st Capital Defense Corps, an anti-aircraft artillery corps, one armored division, six mechanized infantry divisions, and one artillery division.¹³² In addition, a road construction corps operates directly under the MOD, and specialized construction units such as the engineering corps are organized under the purview of the GPB. With about 70% of the KPA's ground forces arrayed south of the Pyongyang-Wonsan line, North Korea remains capably positioned to launch a surprise attack against the South.¹³³

Figure 2: Locations of North Korean Ground Force Units¹³⁴



131 U.S. Army, “North Korean Tactics,” Army Techniques Publication No. 7-100.2 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, July 2020), 3-2.

132 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 24. According to the 2020 Defense White Paper, there were previously two mechanized corps. These were renamed as divisions, resulting in a reorganization totaling six mechanized infantry divisions, including four existing mechanized infantry divisions.

133 Ibid, 24.

134 U.S. Department of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 2017,” Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 15, 2017), 18.

4.5. Corps

A corps is made up of subordinate units (divisions, brigades, regiments, battalions, and other smaller units, such as companies, platoons, and squads) based on its assigned mission. The KPA has four infantry corps permanently arrayed along the DMZ (I, II, IV, and V) in its first strategic echelon. Tank brigades and mechanized divisions make up the second strategic echelon. Residual KPA ground forces are stationed throughout the country's northern section, including those areas bordering China and Russia.¹³⁵

4.6. Divisions

The largest of the KPA ground force units that conduct tactical operations are divisions and regiments. Divisions are generally subordinate to a corps but may report directly to the GSD, as in the case of the armored, mechanized infantry, and artillery divisions. KPA ground force divisions, the largest of the tactical formations, are capable of conducting sustained independent operations as either part of a corps or higher organization. A typical KPA infantry division is made up of about 12,800 troops, of whom roughly 1,600 are officers. The structure of a division is dependent upon its mission and location, with units along the DMZ receiving additional artillery and military police battalions.¹³⁶

4.7. Brigades

KPA ground forces are mechanized and formed around tanks and special forces. The KPA determined that mechanized and tank divisions were suitable for operating on the terrain of the Korean Peninsula. Over the past few years, it has reorganized its ground forces structure into brigade-level tank, mechanized, and missile units to execute modern warfare.¹³⁷ KPA ground force brigades can be part of an existing division, or they exist as separate units that are capable of conducting independent operations. A typical KPA tank brigade is composed of about 2,500 troops, of whom roughly 230 are officers. Brigades can conduct sustained independent operations for several days.¹³⁸

4.8. Regiments

For KPA ground forces, an infantry regiment represents the basic combined arms unit, where different combat arms are integrated for specific tasks and responsibilities. A typical KPA infantry regiment is made up of about 2,500 troops, of whom roughly 185 are officers. While regiments are designed to operate as part of a division, they are capable of sustained independent operations over short durations.¹³⁹

135 U.S. Army, "North Korean Tactics," 3-9.

136 Ibid, 3-7, 3-10, 3-11

137 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 135.

138 U.S. Army, "North Korean Tactics," 3-14, 3-15.

139 Ibid, 3-15, 3-16.

4.9. Battalions

Battalions are considered the “basic unit of action” within the KPA ground force. A typical KPA infantry battalion fields around 555 troops, of whom approximately 30 are officers. KPA ground force battalions are designed to conduct basic combat missions as a part of a division or regiment.¹⁴⁰

4.10. Companies

As the largest unit that operates without a staff within the structure of KPA ground forces, a company is made up of around 120 troops, of whom roughly six are officers. KPA ground force companies are designed for tactical tasks as part of higher-level units that include battalions, regiments, or divisions.¹⁴¹

4.11. Platoons and Squads

Within the KPA ground force structure, the platoon is the smallest unit capable of conducting independent fire and maneuver. A KPA ground force infantry platoon is ordinarily made up of 39 troops and includes one officer. Platoons are designed for tactical tasks and are the basis for a patrol or functional element as part of a higher-level unit, including a company, battalion, or detachment. Squads within a platoon are usually comprised of 12 troops and led by a sergeant.¹⁴²

4.12. Special Operations Forces

To strengthen the status of North Korea’s special operations units, the North Korean military now classifies “Special Operations” as a separate branch within the KPA. Special operations units are organized throughout the KPA’s various branches and echelons, including the IIth Corps special operations battalion, sniper brigades and light infantry division and brigades of the front corps (DMZ), sniper brigades assigned to the naval and air/anti-air commands, and light infantry regiments of the forward (DMZ) divisions. It is estimated that there are about 200,000 special operations troops overall.¹⁴³

During wartime, special operations units are expected to use various infiltration methods, such as helicopters, AN-2 aircraft, air-cushion vehicles, or tunnels to carry out combined operations in the front and rear areas of South Korea. These operations include strikes on major military units and facilities, assassination of key figures, and creating general chaos in the rear area. North Korea continues to strengthen its special operations capability by modernizing its weaponry

140 Ibid, 3-16, 3-17.

141 Ibid, 3-17.

142 Ibid, 3-19, 3-20.

143 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 25.

and conducting air, sea, and ground infiltration training. Training includes conducting attacks on mock replicas of strategic U.S.-ROK facilities.¹⁴⁴

4.13. Air and Anti-Air Forces

Under the Air and Anti-Air Command, KPA air forces operate approximately 1,580 total aircraft that are configured and divided between four zones covering North Korea. KPA air forces consist of five air divisions, one tactical transport brigade, two air force sniper brigades, and air defense units.¹⁴⁵ KPA air forces personnel number between roughly 110,000 and 120,000, including up to 29,000 officers.¹⁴⁶

KPA air forces operate out of more than 20 bases. This includes 13 major bases, as well as numerous auxiliary airfields and airstrips throughout North Korea that can be used in emergencies, including at least one operational underground runway where aircraft can land without overhead observation.¹⁴⁷ Most airbases have hardened hangars that are built into mountains as protection against attack.¹⁴⁸

Of its total fleet of roughly 1,580 aircraft, approximately 810 are fighter aircraft. About 40% of these fighter jets are deployed south of the Pyongyang-Wonsan Line, positioned to attack at short notice.¹⁴⁹ Remaining aircraft include 30 surveillance and reconnaissance planes, 170 trainers, 340 transporters (including AN-2s), and 290 helicopters.¹⁵⁰ KPA air forces are capable of infiltrating special operations units into South Korea using AN-2s and helicopters.¹⁵¹

The KPA continues with efforts to modernize and streamline its air forces by retiring old trainer aircraft, producing and deploying additional AN-2s and light aircraft, and by developing various types of reconnaissance and attack unmanned aerial vehicles. However, due to the limited introduction of new fighter aircraft, it is strengthening its air defense capabilities through the development and deployment of new surface-to-air missiles.¹⁵²

KPA air defenses integrate aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft artillery and radar units under the headquarters of the Air and Anti-Air Command. SA-2 and SA-5 surface-to-air missiles are positioned in the east and west regions across the front line, while SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery are concentrated in the Pyongyang area, where they form a concentrated anti-aircraft defense network. Since there are many radar air defense units, including ground control interceptors and early warning stations, distributed throughout North Korea, KPA air defenses can surveil the airspace over the entire Korean Peninsula. The KPA

144 Ibid.

145 Ibid, 27.

146 U.S. Army, "North Korean Tactics," B-I; see also Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 134.

147 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 153; and U.S. Army, "North Korean Tactics," B-I.

148 U.S. Army, "North Korean Tactics," B-I.

149 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 27.

150 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 136; see also Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 153.

151 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 27.

152 Ibid.

is also building an automatic air defense command and control system to increase the detection accuracy of its radar air defense units while decreasing operational response times.¹⁵³

Figure 3: Locations of North Korean Air Forces¹⁵⁴



4.14. Naval Forces

There are two fleet commands subordinate to the KPA's Naval Command—the West Sea Fleet Command and the East Sea Fleet Command. Between these commands, there are more than 40 naval bases. Among these, there are 13 primary bases, with eight located on the east coast and five on the west coast. Naval forces consist of 13 squadrons and two maritime sniper brigades.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2017," Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 15, 2017), 19.

At 60,000 active-duty personnel, KPA naval forces represent the smallest of North Korea's traditional military branches and lack reserve personnel. These forces operate approximately 840 surface-type vessels along with 70 Romeo class and midget-type submarines. Among the surface-type vessels, there are about 430 combatant ships and vessels including patrol and torpedo boats. Additionally, there are approximately 250 amphibious landing vessels, including over 130 air-cushion vehicles and 90 high-speed landing boats. These operational assets are expected to infiltrate special warfare units in the rear area of South Korea, striking major military and strategic facilities and securing important landing beaches. Finally, there are about 20 vessels dedicated to mine warfare and 40 support-type craft.¹⁵⁵

With roughly 60 percent of its naval forces arrayed south of the Pyongyang-Wonsan Line, the KPA can launch a rapid surprise attack. However, because these forces are organized around small high-speed vessels, their operational range is limited. With coastal artillery and surface-to-ship missiles deployed along the East and West Sea coasts, coastal defense forces can attack ships approaching from the sea and perform counter-amphibious operations. Recent KPA naval force efforts include the construction and operation of medium and large vessels, some of which are equipped with ship-to-ship missiles, improving their ability to attack over long distances.¹⁵⁶ North Korea is also modifying and upgrading its submarine fleet. A program is currently underway to build two new submarines, at least one of which will be purposed to carry submarine-launched ballistic missiles.¹⁵⁷

155 U.S. Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2017," 12, 13, 20; Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 26; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 134; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 152; Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2018*, 30.

156 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 26.

157 Sangmi Cha, "North Korea Building Two Submarines, One Capable of Firing Ballistic Missiles – Lawmaker," *Reuters*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-idUSKBN27J0MC>, accessed February 23, 2021.

Figure 4: Location of North Korean Naval Forces¹⁵⁸



4.15. Strategic Forces

In 2014, North Korea expanded and reorganized its Strategic Rocket Command into a Strategic Force Command. The ROK MND estimates that up to 13 missile brigades exist under this command, staffed by approximately 10,000 personnel. North Korea continues to develop its portfolio of short, medium, and long-range ballistic, nuclear, and chemical weapons to reinforce its strategic attack capabilities.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 2017,” Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 15, 2017), 20.

¹⁵⁹ Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 134, 137–38; Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2020*, 27–28.

4.16. Reserve Forces

North Korean reserve forces stand at approximately 7.62 million, which represents roughly 30 percent of the country's population. North Koreans between the ages of 14 and 60 are subject to mobilization in one of the following reserve components: Reserve Military Training Units; Worker-Peasant Red Guards; Red Youth Guards; and paramilitary units.¹⁶⁰ All reservists are provisioned with combat-related gear that include both crew-served weapons (weapons requiring two or more reservists to operate due to size, weight, or other factors) and individual weapons. Reservists receive annual training that lasts between 15 and 30 days and remain on standby.¹⁶¹

4.17. Reserve Military Training Units (RMTU)

The 600,000-strong RMTU provides turn-key augmentation to the KPA's combat capability during a contingency. Comprised of 17 to 50-year-old males and 17 to 30-year-old female volunteers, the RMTU maintains the highest level of training among North Korea's reserve forces and can thus be mobilized immediately during a contingency to either help defend the rear areas or augment active forces. RMTU members are assigned to units at the brigade or division level and must complete up to 500 hours of intensive annual training. This allows the RMTU to maintain organizational and equipment readiness levels similar to that of active forces.¹⁶²

4.18. Worker-Peasant Red Guards (WPRG)

The WPRG stands at 5.7 million members and consists of males between the ages of 17 and 60 who are capable of being mobilized, along with women between the ages of 17 and 30. Members are organized into units, usually based on their workplace. They receive arms and must complete 160 hours of annual training to ensure that they can carry out their duties—including anti-aircraft gunnery—in defending local areas and key facilities.¹⁶³

4.19. Red Youth Guards (RYG)

The RYG is a student military organization made up of male and female students between the ages of 14 and 16. They are organized into battalions or companies at each secondary school in North Korea. Student membership stands at one million. Members are required to undergo up to 450 hours of annual instruction, including attendance at training camps and marksmanship

160 Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper: 2018*, 35.

161 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 154.

162 Ibid, 155.

163 Ibid. The Ministry of Unification (*Understanding North Korea: 2017*) states “The WPRG was renamed the Worker-Peasant Red Army (WPRA) at the Conference of Party Representatives that convened on September 28, 2010.” However, the Ministry of National Defense’s 2018 Defense White Paper maintains the term “Worker-Peasant Red Guards (WPRG).” This report will adhere to “WPRG” for consistency.

training. In a contingency, the RYG would be expected to take up arms and help defend rear areas or serve as “suicide squads.”¹⁶⁴

4.20. Paramilitary Units

North Korea can mobilize up to 320,000 additional reserve forces from other organizations. Around 189,000 of these reserves would come from personnel who are assigned to the Ministry of Social Security—situated directly under the SAC—and serve as national police and border guards in peacetime. In addition, approximately 100,000 would come from the Guard Command, which is primarily responsible for the protection of Kim Jong-un and his family, as well as KWP elites.¹⁶⁵

4.21. Mobilization and Integration of Reserve Forces with the KPA at the Local Level

Policy guidance and directives regarding matters of organization, mobilization, and integration of reserve forces with active duty KPA units are sent down from the Party CMC, through the Party’s Civil Defense Department to the KWP military committees at the province, county, and small city levels. In rural areas, local KWP military committees receive their guidance and direction from the county level. Leadership of the local KWP military committees is comprised of local Party officials, workers, and students.¹⁶⁶

A recent example of how mobilization works was on display when authorities declared a state of emergency in Kaesong, near the Military Demarcation Line, after a North Korean defector slipped back into the country in July 2020. On July 26, the Kaesong Party Committee’s Civil Defense Department ordered a mobilization of all the city’s civil defense forces, including Worker-Peasant Red Guards and paramilitary units. The mobilization order required that they equip themselves with a 15-day supply of food, weapons, and camouflage. They were to assemble for an emergency meeting, where their readiness level would be inspected. The mobilized forces were then sent on an eight-kilometer night march in the mountains near Kaesong to be trained in searching for infiltrators. The Kaesong Party Committee announced that repeat training would be required, and that Civil Defense Department staff would be on hand for oversight and inspection.¹⁶⁷

4.22. KPA System of Military Service

North Korea has the longest compulsory military service requirement of any country in the world. Service eligibility tracking begins at age 14, and service usually begins by the time a student

164 Ibid, 156. The Ministry of Unification (*Understanding North Korea: 2017*) refers to this organization as the “Young Red Guards” while the Ministry of National Defense’s 2018 Defense White Paper refers to “Red Youth Guards.” To maintain consistency, this report will adhere to “Red Youth Guards.”

165 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 79, 156; U.S. Army, “North Korean Tactics,” 3-2.

166 Collins, *Denied from the Start*, 65-66.

167 Jong So-Yong, “Kaesong’s Civil Defense Forces in a State of ‘Emergency Mobilization’,” *Daily NK*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kaesong-civil-defense-forces-state-emergency-mobilization/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

graduates from secondary school. Males can expect to serve for at least 10 years, and volunteer females for seven years. After that, males and some volunteer females can expect to be attached to a reserve unit of one type or another for several additional decades.

Besides special operations forces, the typical active-duty soldier will spend a third to a half of their time in the KPA doing non-military work, such as construction or farming. Access to food presents a perpetual challenge during that time. Therefore, the soldier will likely spend time assisting the unit to which he or she is assigned to engage in farming, fishing, gathering or other activities to supplement nutritional needs.

This lack of food has created a preference for being assigned to border patrol duty due to the opportunities to earn income. Food shortages also incentivize misconduct on the part of soldiers, which creates strains between the KPA and local civilians. While serving in the KPA, most soldiers will not get leave to visit their parents—only 20 percent of KPA soldiers are estimated to make such visits while serving in the KPA.¹⁶⁸

4.22.1. *Conscription Eligibility*

All males in North Korea must register for military recruitment eligibility by the age of 14. By 15, they undergo two rounds of physical examination for further eligibility determination. These basic physical examinations are administered at the city and county level by the military mobilization bureau. Using the results of these physical exams, the provincial military mobilization bureau conducts a more comprehensive examination. Once physical fitness has been evaluated, the bureau allocates personnel to the military branches based on need.

This system of selection ordinarily culminates after graduation from secondary school in March or April when the recruit, who is about 17 years of age, joins either a military division or corps. Not all high school graduates directly enter the military. For those accepted to a vocational college, it is common practice to join the military upon graduation. However, if they go to work in a factory or another enterprise directly upon graduation, they will be required to enter the military after having worked for a period of less than three years or before they reach the age of 25—whichever comes first. Males are officially discharged fully from reserve status once they reach 60 years of age.¹⁶⁹

In previous years, the height and weight requirement for prospective soldiers was over 150 centimeters (4' 11") and 48 kilograms (105.8 lbs) respectively. These standards were relaxed in August 1994 to 148 centimeters (4' 10") and 43 kilograms (94.8 lbs) when the average size of

168 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 135-37.

169 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 139-40; North Korea Information Portal, “전민군사복무제” [Military Service System], Ministry of Unification, <https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/term/viewNkKnwldgDicary.do?pageIndex=1&dicaryId=159>, accessed February 28, 2021; “북한의 징병제도” [North Korea’s Conscription System], *Tongil News*, October 16, 2002, <http://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=24098>, accessed February 28, 2021; “북한의 군 복무 제도는” [North Korea’s Military Service System], *KBS News*, January 8, 2007, <https://news.kbs.co.kr/news/view.do?ncd=1280199>, accessed February 28, 2021; “클로즈업 북한 - 북한의 군대” [North Korea Close Up: North Korea’s Military], *KBS World Radio*, March 28, 2019, http://world.kbs.co.kr/special/northkorea/contents/news/closeup_view.htm?No=360645&lang=k, accessed February 28, 2021.

teenage recruits began decreasing due to nutritional deficiencies caused by famine-related food shortages. In 2012, this was again dropped to 142 centimeters (4' 8")—about the same height as the average fourth grade male in South Korea—before being reestablished at 148 centimeters in February 2020. The shift back to the 148-centimeter standard may be due to the comparably healthier “market generation” who were born in 2003 or 2004 and thus targeted for the 2020 enlistment year.¹⁷⁰

Those who fail to meet these standard physical requirements are generally exempted from military service. There are additional avenues of exemption. Workers in special fields and beneficiaries of particular government policies are exempt from serving in the military. Examples of special workers include special security workers and essential personnel in science and technology, the arts, and education administration. Examples of policy beneficiaries include college students who pass special military exams, talented and gifted students, and only sons of elderly parents.

There are also many cases of military service exemptions due to political reasons. These include “reactionaries” or children of the “hostile class” and people of poor *songbun*, including family members of defectors to South Korea (out to the second paternal cousin and first maternal cousin), a defector to North Korea, or someone in prison.¹⁷¹ Moreover, one’s *songbun* plays a significant role in determining a military assignment. Enlistees with good *songbun* and well-placed parents are likely to receive a favorable assignment in a prestigious unit, such as the Guard Command in Pyongyang, but those with poor *songbun* are more likely to be assigned to an undesirable unit. According to some reports, some individuals bribe officials with payments of over \$500 for favorable military assignments.¹⁷²

Females are also accepted for military service. In 2015, it was widely reported by various press outlets, apparently in error, that Kim Jong-un had ordered military service by North Korean females to become mandatory. In July 2020, *Yonhap News* posted a video by a North Korean defector that appeared to correct previous reporting over the matter. According to the defector, females can enter the military, but only on a voluntary basis.¹⁷³ As long as female volunteer candidates are free from infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis or hepatitis, and physical examinations show no arm

170 Jeong Tae-Joo, “148cm 미만 병역 면제’...2020년 달라진 北 초모 기준” [‘Exemption from Military Service Under 148cm’...Changed Entry Standards for 2020], *Daily NK*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/148cm-미만-병역-면제-2020년-달라진-北-초모-기준/>, accessed February 28, 2021; Han Seol-Bi, “북한군 키 제한 얼마가 봤더니” [The North Korean Military’s Height Restriction], *Maeil Gyeongje*, January 20, 2013, <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/view/2013/01/47398/>, accessed February 28, 2021; “‘미사일 불량난’ 하는 北의 키 142cm짜리 군인” [142cm North Korean Soldiers ‘playing with missile fire’], *Dong-A Ilbo*, April 3, 2012, <https://www.donga.com/news/article/all/20120403/45242523/1>, accessed February 28, 2021; and Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 140.

171 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 140; North Korea Information Portal, “Military Service System,” Ministry of Unification.

172 “North Korea Close Up: North Korea’s Military,” *KBS World Radio*, March 28, 2019.

173 *Yonhap News* reported stories on mandatory women’s military service in North Korea. See Kim Gwi-Geun, “김정은, ‘군복무 1년 연장·女 의무복무제’ 지시” [Kim Jong-un Orders Extension of Military Service by One Year and Makes Service Mandatory for Women], *Yonhap News*, September 26, 2014, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20140925172351043>; and Moon Gwan-Hyeon, “북한, 여군도 ‘징병제’...입대 신장 기준 142cm” [Female Soldiers also Conscripted in North Korea...142cm Standard for Height], *Yonhap News*, February 24, 2015, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/MYH20150224005600038>; for the clarifying post with video, see “북한 여성 軍 의무복무를 둘러싼 ‘사실과 오해’” [Facts and Misconceptions Surrounding

or leg abnormalities, they are usually accepted into the military. The height standard, believed to be 142 centimeters (4' 8"), is not strictly applied.¹⁷⁴ Depending on the unit, female soldiers usually make up between 10 and 30 percent of assigned personnel. The military occupations typically assigned to female North Korean soldiers include positions in the medical, administrative, or transport fields. Some also work as guards or belong to coastal artillery or anti-aircraft batteries.¹⁷⁵

4.22.2. Conscription Period

North Korea's conscription requirement occasionally changes depending on internal and external conditions. Nonetheless, the country has consistently had the longest military service requirement in the world. The military service requirement was initially set in 1958 at three-and-a-half years for ground forces and four years each for naval and air forces in accordance with "Cabinet Decision No. 148." Then in April 1993, a 10-year service term was mandated based on orders from Kim Jong-il. It was widely believed, however, that regulations governing service duration were not rigid, with males serving up to 12 years before being discharged and members of the special forces serving more than 13 years depending on their specialty. In October 1996, a military service ordinance was issued, requiring males and females to serve until 30 and 26 years of age respectively. Finally, in March 2003 at the 6th Session of the 10th SPA, the "Military Service Act" was enacted, officially setting a military service period of 10 years for men and 7 years for women. Members of special operations units, however, continued with a 13-year requirement.¹⁷⁶

4.23. North Korean Military Ranks

The North Korean military rank structure is divided into officer and enlisted ranks. For officers, there are 15 separate ranks, the top three of which are reserved as honorary ranks for Kim regime leaders (grand marshal, marshal, and vice marshal). KPA officers and enlisted personnel are grouped into the following categories (from highest to lowest ranks in each category):¹⁷⁷

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- 174 Mandatory Military Service of North Korean Military Women], *Yonhap News*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/MYH20200630015600888>; all accessed February 28, 2021.
- 175 "북한군, 여성 '의무복무제' 올해 4월부터 실시" [North Korean Military to Begin Mandatory Military Service System for Women This April], *Daily NK*, January 27, 2015, <https://www.dailynk.com/북한군-여성-의무복무제-올해-4월부/>, accessed March 1, 2021.
- 176 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 135.
- 177 Park Yong-Han, "홍준표 '북한군 복무기간 아느냐...7년 · 10년 중 정답은'" [Hong Joon-Pyo: 'Do You Know North Korea's Military Service Period?' Is the Answer 7 or 10 Years?], *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 26, 2017, <https://news.joins.com/article/21513722>, accessed March 1, 2021; "North Korea Close Up: North Korea's Military," *KBS World Radio*, March 28, 2019; "North Korea's Military Service System." *KBS News*, January 8, 2007; Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 140; "North Korean Military to Begin Mandatory Military Service System for Women This April," *Daily NK*, January 27, 2015.
- 177 For the enlisted ranks, the ROK Ministry of Unification uses different terminology carrying the same meaning. For the sake of standardization, the author uses equivalent U.S. and ROK Army rank equivalents; see Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 137 and Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 142-43.

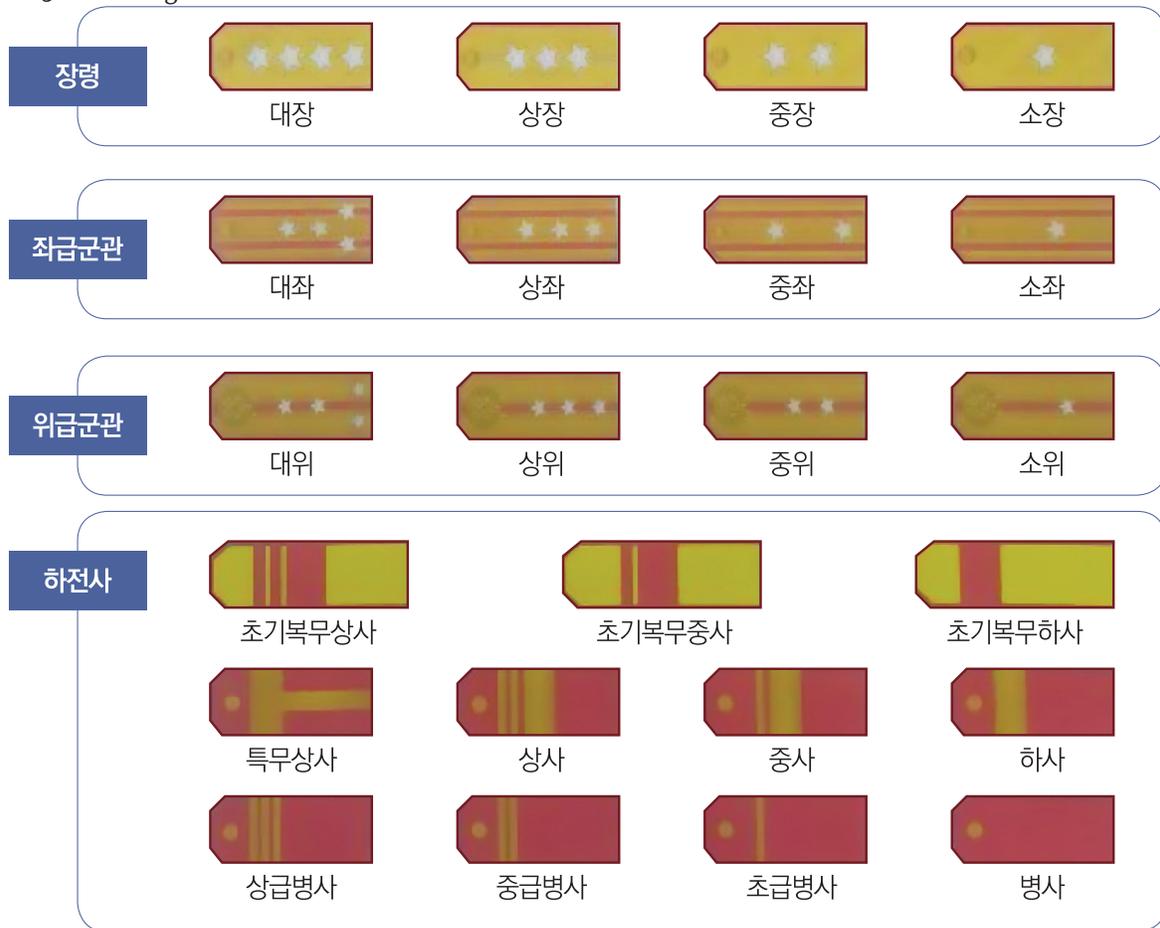
4.23.1. *Officer*

- General grade: general, colonel general, lieutenant general, and major general
- Field grade: senior colonel (also referred to as ‘brigadier’), colonel, lieutenant colonel, and major
- Company grade: captain, senior lieutenant, lieutenant, and junior lieutenant

4.23.2. *Enlisted*

- Senior enlisted ranks: sergeant major (also referred to as ‘chief master sergeant’), master sergeant, sergeant first class, and staff sergeant
- Lower enlisted ranks: sergeant, corporal, lance corporal, and private

Figure 5: *KPA Insignia*¹⁷⁸



[그림 4-3] 북한군 계급장(견장)

178 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2021*, 144.

4.24. Promotion and Leadership Paths

In general, a military mobilization center will assign a new conscript to a service branch based on the KPA's internal requirements. Priority is placed on the needs of special operations forces, naval forces, air and anti-air forces, and then ground forces. Most new entrants then proceed to a three-month basic military training course, except special force trainees who receive nine months of basic training.

After three to five years of exemplary service, enlisted personnel with acceptable *songbun* qualify to become noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Exemplary NCOs may be offered an opportunity to become a commissioned officer. Junior lieutenants may be sent to either a two- or four-year officer academy. Top graduates from the two-year schools become lieutenants. Those sent to the four-year schools are automatically promoted to lieutenant upon graduation.

Junior lieutenants who do not attend an academy can expect to get promoted to lieutenant after two to three years. After serving four to six years, the lieutenant becomes promotable to take on the role of company commander. Three to seven years of additional service and graduation from Kim Il-sung Military University are the next career requisites for officers in order to take command of a battalion. Finally, to command at the regiment level, an officer must be by-named selected and complete a two-year Tactical Studies Course at Kim Il-sung University.¹⁷⁹

4.25. Military Discipline

All KPA military personnel must follow the “10-point Compliance Guidelines for Military Life.”¹⁸⁰ These guidelines, developed by Kim Jong-il, were first announced in a speech by Kim Il-sung on November 30, 1977, at the 7th Conference of the KPA. They were intended to eliminate noncompliance with military regulations while strengthening the Party's control over the KPA.

The “10-point Compliance Guidelines for Military Life” include the following:¹⁸¹

1. ***Strict compliance with military regulations.*** The emphasis is on strengthening soldiers' learning of military regulations, including those covering discipline and living quarters.
2. ***Being well-versed in weapons and weapons maintenance.***
3. ***Thoroughly carry out military orders.*** This refers to the ethos of executing, at any cost, the orders of commanders based on the orders of the supreme commander.
4. ***Carry out tasks, at any cost, given by the party and political organizations.*** This means faithfully carrying out tasks given by the League of Socialist Working Youth and Party organizations at all levels, no matter the cost, to execute the orders, decisions, and instructions of the Party Central Committee.
5. ***Strict protection of state, military, and party organization secrets.***

179 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2017*, 112.

180 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 140–41.

181 North Korea Information Portal, “군무생활 10대 준수사항” [10-point Compliance Guidelines for Military Life], Ministry of Unification, https://nkinfo.unikorea.go.kr/nkp/term/viewNkKnwldgDicary.do?pageIndex=1&dicaryId=22&menuId=NK_KNWLDG_DICARY, accessed March 2, 2021.

6. *Strictly abide by socialist law and order.* This means protecting and defending the interests of the entire people, including workers, farmers, soldiers, and office workers.
7. *Participate, without fail, in political military training.*
8. *Love the people and not encroach upon the people's property.* This is meant to promote military-civil unity by ensuring that KPA soldiers do not violate the interests of the people.
9. *Thoroughly protect and conserve national property and military supplies.*
10. *Unity and solidarity within the military, from the bottom to the top.* This is intended to foster camaraderie, whereby officers love the soldiers and soldiers respect the officers in command.

It should be evident that these guidelines not only address the typical tenets and rules one would expect to find in doctrine related to appropriate military behavior, but also show how the supreme leader, through the Party apparatus, has dominant control over the KPA. Number 4 binds the KPA soldier to carry out the will of the Party, while number 5 commits the KPA soldier to Party indoctrination.¹⁸² This explains the presence of direct Party oversight, which is maintained at every level of command throughout KPA organizations.

Despite the strict adherence required of its military personnel to the 10-point guidelines, breakdowns in discipline within the KPA are not uncommon. Lee and Chung identify eight categories of disciplinary problems among KPA personnel by analyzing the content of leaked internal documents, along with information provided by North Korean escapees. They assess the relative severity and pervasiveness of these categories based on survey feedback provided by 200 former KPA escapees.¹⁸³ The following paragraphs present categories of disciplinary problems in the KPA based on Lee and Chung's work.

4.26. Disciplinary Problems in the KPA

Disciplinary problems in the KPA can be grouped into the following categories:¹⁸⁴

- Negligence in executing the supreme leader's directives¹⁸⁵
- Misappropriating military supplies
- Abusing the public
- Alcohol abuse
- Assaulting fellow KPA members
- Desertion
- Mishandling sensitive military information
- Accessing South Korean or other foreign information

182 Ibid.

183 Lee Kyo-Duk and Chung Kyu-Sup, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2012), 5-7.

184 See Ibid, 9-37 for characterization of the categories and 41-56 for assessment of the categories.

185 Lee and Chung specify "Kim Jong-Il's Directives." This report uses the same eight categories with slightly modified nomenclature to appropriately adapt and update the information.

4.26.1. *Negligence in Executing the Supreme Leader's Directives*

Negligence in executing directives from the supreme leader carries with it a subjective interpretation of how—not just *whether*—orders are carried out. In other words, reluctance to perform tasks, complaining or using excuses, completing only the minimum level of work required, or any other action that can be perceived as evasive or disrespectful in carrying out directives is an affront toward the supreme leader, and thus falls into this category.¹⁸⁶ Among recent, high-profile examples of this type of infraction, perhaps the most noteworthy is the case involving the insubordination and subsequent execution of Hyon Yong-chol, North Korea's ex-defense chief. Hyon was charged with disobeying Kim Jong-un after being caught falling asleep at an event attended by the supreme leader. He was reportedly charged with treason and executed at a firing range with an anti-aircraft gun.¹⁸⁷

4.26.2. *Misappropriating Military Supplies*

Misappropriation of military supplies occurs widely throughout the KPA, regardless of rank. Because priority is given to the military for supplies, KPA soldiers have access to resources that can be embezzled for personal gain. Examples include stealing food, clothing materials, and munitions and then selling the items at markets. Officers also steal from their subordinates, including the shoes and uniforms of new recruits.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, there are reports of officers embezzling rice provided to their units and selling it at nearby markets while giving their soldiers cheaper corn porridge. Front-line soldiers who come from wealthy households carry cash to bribe superiors to avoid harsh duty and training and receive privileges, such as extra food and clothing, and even promotions.¹⁸⁹ Because of its cash-producing potential and ties with smuggling networks in North Korea's border regions, smuggling is another area of corruption in which KPA soldiers engage. The items embezzled sometimes go beyond just military supplies.

In November 2020, KPA soldiers stationed in Hyesan, a city with a population of 200,000 located on the country's northeastern border with China, were caught in a gold smuggling operation in collusion with six local residents. On the group's fifth trip into China to exchange gold for U.S. dollars, the soldiers were caught by Special Forces who were monitoring the border. Considering the violation of border-related COVID restrictions and the involvement of state assets, this was considered a very serious crime. This event triggered a 20-day lockdown.¹⁹⁰

186 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 11-12, 42.

187 Jumin Park and James Pearson, "North Korea Executes Defence Chief with an Anti-Aircraft Gun: South Korea Agency," *Reuters*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-purge-idUSKBN0NY01J20150513>, accessed March 6, 2021.

188 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 15-17, 43.

189 Yoon and Jeong, "A North Korean Defector's Tale Shows Rotting Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 4, 2020.

190 Sewon Kim, "North Korea Arrests Six Gold Smugglers Who Triggered Hyesan Lockdown," translated by Leejin Jun, *RFA*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/gold-11202020173403.html>, accessed March 4, 2021.

The crime was considered serious enough that the Party Central Committee dispatched Ri Pyong-chol, Vice Chairman of the CMC, to the border city.¹⁹¹ Once the 20-day lockdown was over, four soldiers attached to a company in the Border Security Command's 25th Brigade—a commanding officer, a political officer, and two soldiers—were executed by firing squad.¹⁹² These events not only spotlighted the level of embezzling and cross-border smuggling in the KPA, but also underscored the level of risk the soldiers were willing to take, even after Kim Jong-un had launched a crackdown on corruption in the KPA.

After the release of a report on May 4, 2020 by the KPA's General Staff Operations Bureau concerning military supplies and war reserves, Kim Jong-un issued Order No. 00611. This order stipulated increased penalties for various kinds of military corruption, including stealing soldiers' rations. The report that prompted the directive highlighted major problems, including improper distribution of basic supplies and embezzlement. In one case, a KPA Air and Anti-Air Force unit in Kaechon had falsely reported supplies of aircraft fuel. The gap between the actual amount of fuel on hand and the amount reported was over five tons. In another case, soldiers in the 5th Corps and other units were being purposely underfed with two meals of corn noodles per day during winter training, although the unit's reports claimed that they were being fed properly.¹⁹³

4.26.3. *Abusing the Public*

Abusive behavior toward local civilians can erode trust between the KPA and the public. Abuse comes in many forms, but most commonly in the form of looting food and other supplies from local residents. This form of abuse is exacerbated by the country's chronic food shortages.¹⁹⁴ In August 2020, KPA soldiers sent to Unpa County to help with flood relief efforts were reportedly looting from local residents. Sent to help with rebuilding flood-damaged houses, the soldiers tried to sell construction materials they had stolen for alcohol, cigarettes, and foodstuffs. The

Abusive behavior toward local civilians can erode trust between the KPA and the public. Abuse comes in many forms, but most commonly in the form of looting food and other supplies from local residents.

191 Lee Chae-Un, "Ri Pyong Chol Rushes to Hyesan to Deal with the 'Hyesan Incident'," *Daily NK*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/ri-pyong-chol-rushes-to-hyesan-to-deal-with-the-hyesan-incident/>, accessed March 4, 2021.

192 Lee Chae-Un, "Four soldiers executed for taking part in Hyesan Incident," *Daily NK*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/four-soldiers-executed-taking-part-hyesan-incident/>, accessed March 4, 2021.

193 Jeong Tae-Joo, "Kim Jong Un Orders Military to Investigate Corruption," *Daily NK*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-jong-un-orders-military-investigate-corruption/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

194 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 19-22.

residents, under pressure from local authorities, refused to deal with them. As revenge for not cooperating, soldiers looted houses and stole food from local markets, and in some cases ran up unpaid tabs at restaurants.¹⁹⁵

4.26.4. *Alcohol Abuse*

North Korean authorities have flagged excessive alcohol consumption as a persistent problem throughout the KPA that coincides with other issues, such as assault and desertion.¹⁹⁶ Alcohol abuse can trigger other forms of transgression, including insubordination. In 2018, after consuming too much alcohol, a drunken private “Ri,” working at an underground rocket storage facility in Kanggye, Jagang Province, openly complained about the KPA and Party policies. He was promptly detained and arrested after his comments were reported to the MSS. As punishment, he received a year-long sentence at a labor camp. It was also ordered that when his sentence was over, he would be dishonorably discharged and then forced to work as a laborer at a mine.¹⁹⁷

4.26.5. *Assaulting Fellow KPA Members*

Along with alcohol abuse, assault is a prevalent problem in the KPA. For this reason, lecture material and political training focus on relations between officers and soldiers, and between more established soldiers and new recruits, in an attempt to reduce incidents of assault.¹⁹⁸ Another apparently long-standing problem in the KPA is sexual violence against female soldiers. In 2019, Daily NK reported that three female soldiers had been arrested after indirectly protesting their abuse by deserting their 3d Corps posts from a base in Pyongwon and wandering for three months. The victims claimed that sexual abuse by their male superiors had led them to desert their posts, since they could not directly report to their perpetrators.¹⁹⁹

4.26.6. *Desertion*

Instances of KPA soldiers abandoning their posts are quite common. It is estimated that between 5-10% of KPA soldiers desert their post at least once. It is thought that the problem of desertion persists due to food shortages and fatigue from the long service requirement.²⁰⁰ In August 2020, a KPA soldier serving in a 1st Corps engineering company in Anbyong, Gangwon Province deserted his post out of anger for being continually assigned to guard duty. He left his

195 Jong So-Yong, “Soldiers in Unpa County are Stealing and Looting from Locals,” *Daily NK*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/soldiers-unpa-county-stealing-looting-locals/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

196 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 22-25, 47.

197 Mun Dong-Hui, “North Korean Soldier Imprisoned for Military Service Complaint,” *Daily NK*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-soldier-imprisoned-for-military-service-complaint/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

198 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 2-27.

199 Mun Dong-Hui, “Women Soldiers in North Korea Desert Post in Protest of Sexual Abuse,” *Daily NK*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/women-soldiers-in-north-korea-soldiers-desert-post-in-protest-of-sexual-abuse/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

200 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 28-30.

weapon, changed clothes at a nearby house, and hitched several rides before arriving at his home near Pyongyang, where he was immediately arrested. The incident caused alarm among officials in Pyongyang, as he had easily sneaked past security checkpoints. Two other soldiers from the deserter's unit who were sent to find him were also reported to have deserted. In addition to the runaway soldier, the military engineering unit commander, platoon leader, political and security officers were also arrested and handed over for interrogations.²⁰¹

4.26.7. *Mishandling Sensitive Military Information*

Information considered “sensitive” by North Korean authorities is frequently leaked outside of the country's borders. North Korea considers any information related to the country's military activities to be “sensitive.” Infractions range from careless handling of information to selling classified secrets to South Korea.²⁰² In mid-June 2019, an emergency directive was reportedly issued to an MSS border unit in Hyesan as a measure to warn and prevent information from being leaked by the ministry's local security department. The directive ordered security officers of the unit to keep an eye on each other to prevent information disclosure to the outside world. It mentioned previous cases in which security personnel had been caught disclosing secrets using foreign-made cell phones.²⁰³

4.26.8. *Accessing South Korean or Other Foreign Information*

The North Korean leadership is particularly sensitive to outside cultural influences that could undermine the regime. In response to such perceived threats, significant efforts go into the ideological indoctrination of new KPA recruits. Despite these efforts, however, South Korean and other countries' songs, movies, and television dramas find their way into the KPA. A primary channel through which these cultural influences filter into the military is the pipeline of new recruits.²⁰⁴ In some instances, the collection, storage, and distribution of outside cultural influences also involves higher-ranking officers.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, on February 22, 2021, the first high-profile victim of North Korea's newly adopted “anti-reactionary thought” law was publicly executed for watching and possessing South Korean dramas and entertainment shows. Senior Colonel “Kim,” assigned to the 3d Corps, was arrested when an inspection team discovered a memory stick that contained South Korean shows during an inspection of his home. He quickly confessed and was sentenced to death by firing squad within a week, a punishment that was carried out at a firing range, in full view of the corps commander and a group of soldiers who had been assembled to witness the

201 Jeong Tae-Joo, “Soldier Arrested After Sneaking Past Pyongyang's Tight Security,” *Daily NK*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/soldier-arrested-after-sneaking-past-pyongyangs-tight-security/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

202 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 30-33.

203 Mun Dong-Hui, “North Korea Launches Investigation into Sensitive Leak by State Security Official,” *Daily NK*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-launches-investigation-into-sensitive-leak-by-state-security-official/>, accessed March 6, 2021.

204 Lee and Chung, *Study of Disciplinary Problems in the North Korean Army*, 33-37, 55.

execution. Senior Colonel Kim's wife and sons were sent to a political prison camp, and his home and personal belongings were confiscated by the state.²⁰⁵

4.27. Conclusion

As depicted in the fragmentary reports above, the Kim regime demonstrates paranoia over the encroachment of outside information into the KPA. The recently passed "anti-reactionary" law and other measures the regime is implementing through the Party apparatus will likely have a near-term dampening effect on access to outside information in the KPA. Accurately measuring this effect is extremely difficult at best, due to gaps in understanding how information is processed in the KPA. The next section examines the authors' in-depth interviews with 16 former KPA soldiers to paint a more comprehensive picture of not only how outside information affects the KPA, but also how official information flows from the apex of the KPA down to the individual soldier.

205 Jeong, "Public Execution of 3d Corps Rear Commander...Military is First Target of 'Bourgeoisie Thought Control,'" *Daily NK*, February 25, 2021.

5. INFORMATION IN THE KPA: INTERVIEWS WITH NORTH KOREAN ESCAPEES WITH KPA EXPERIENCE

5.1. Introduction

Despite the chronic resilience demonstrated by the Kim dynasty over the decades, North Korea's ever-worsening economic conditions point to the very real possibility of irreversible regime impairment. As of this writing, international sanctions continue, and North Korea's borders remain sealed amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim Jong-un's response to this crisis has been to revert to the stale Party approach of calling for self-reliance through a screw-tightening, three-pronged campaign to control information, targeting corruption through punishment and scapegoating of officials, and hermetically sealing the borders.

This unimaginative "more Party" solution to economic distress sets up the unintended potential for worsening North Korea's situation. If destabilizing factors, either in singular succession or in combination, overwhelm the Kim regime's ability to cope, an implosion scenario could unfold. If such a scenario occurs, the Korean People's Army (KPA), incapable of operating as a coherent entity due to the top-down, vertical nature of its command-and-control relationship with the supreme leader, could behave unpredictably. Worse yet, KPA units may have no other choice but to default to pre-built checklists and execute pre-assigned tasks with limited understanding of actual events going on around them.

In other words, the KPA's highly destructive weapons and North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, which include nuclear warheads, could end up being used even if real-world conditions begged otherwise. To prevent such a catastrophe from occurring in Northeast Asia, it is essential to understand the potential communication pathways capable of reaching KPA military forces in the event of a regime breakdown. This will be vital in opening lines of emergency communication to prevent the unnecessary employment of force, prepare for complex humanitarian operations, and if needed, sustain internal defensive operations.

KPA forces, down to the soldier level, will need information about the real-world situation occurring outside North Korea, imminent or ongoing human rights violations targeting them, and humanitarian operations intended to help them. To effectuate information insertion points and pathways to the soldier, more needs to be understood about how information is processed in the KPA—types and characteristics of information; technologies, systems and procedures used; access and control; and organizations involved in the dissemination of information.

This section seeks to address gaps in our understanding of how information is processed inside the KPA at the soldier level. This section organizes "information types" into two categories—official and unofficial.²⁰⁶ Data to support this section was collected using interviews involving North Korean escapees with different types of KPA experience. The section begins with a brief description of the interview methodology, followed by an overview of the interviewees' characteristics. Next, answers to questions under the "official" category are synthesized to describe

206 The decision to approach the report using these two categories is informed by Bermudez's broad category description. See Bermudez, "Information and the DPRK's Military and Power-Holding Elite," in Oh and Hassig, eds., *North Korean Policy Elites*, I-S-I.

how KPA soldiers process day-to-day duty-related information. This is followed by responses to questions pertaining to the “unofficial” category of foreign, outside information accessed and consumed by KPA soldiers.

5.2. Interview Methodology

Sixteen interviews involving North Korean escapees with KPA experience were conducted over six days toward the end of December 2020, each lasting approximately 50 minutes on average. Due to concerns and public health restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 situation in South Korea during this time, all interviews were conducted remotely via an online video chat platform, with interviewees participating from various locations in the Seoul metropolitan area. The authors conducted the interviews entirely in Korean from their respective locations, without the use of an interpreter.

A local partner organization facilitated the coordination of the interviews, including identifying potential interviewees and securing locations at which interviewees would participate in the interviews. The partner organization was informed of the overall topic of the research project, and the primary criterion for identifying interviewees was prior experience in the KPA. At least one individual from the partner organization was present during every interview, providing technical assistance and clarifying the interviewees’ responses as necessary.

Before starting each interview, interviewees were informed of the overall topic of the interview and the general content of the questions they would be asked. Verbal consent was then obtained regarding the recording of the interview for internal research purposes. During this step, interviewees were informed that the responses they provided would be cited anonymously in any documents or reports made available to the public. They were also informed that they could freely skip or decline to respond to any questions they were uncomfortable with answering. All 16 interviewees consented to the recording of the interview.

The authors prepared a list of interview questions prior to the first interview consisting of three broad sets of questions. The first set of questions (13) addressed basic personal information about the interviewees and their service in the KPA, including the unit(s) that they served in, their service years and duty occupation, and their branch of service. The second set of questions (15) pertained to the interviewee’s knowledge about official channels of information in the KPA, with a focus on the unit(s) that they served in. The last and third set of questions (24) encompassed the interviewees’ experiences regarding access to and the distribution of unofficial, outside or foreign information during their time in the KPA.

An electronic copy of these questions was shared with the interviewees prior to their respective interviews, but they were not expected or asked to review them in advance. While the same questions were posed to the interviewees in largely the same order across all interviews, different interviewees provided more or less extensive responses to different questions. Some questions were not asked if interviewees provided pertinent information while responding to another question. At the end of each set of questions and at the end of the interview, interviewees were asked to clarify or elaborate on certain aspects of their responses. Minor modifications were made to the phrasing and language of the questions in consultation with the local partner organization as the interviews progressed.

5.3. Summary Statistics

The 16 interviewees represent a varied set of experiences in the KPA. The age of the interviewees ranged from 21 to 57, with an average age of approximately 35 at the time of the interview.²⁰⁷ Three of the 16 interviewees were female. Collectively, the interviewees' service years spanned 40 years, from 1979 to 2019. The range in KPA service years allowed for the tracking of changes and trends over time. The year of escape from North Korea ranged from 2003 to 2019.

All major branches of the KPA are represented except for the Strategic Force Command, including ground forces (seven interviewees), special operations forces (three), the air force (two), and the navy (two).²⁰⁸ The final rank of the interviewees ranges from lance corporal (*cho-geup byeong-sa*) to first lieutenant (*jung-wi*). The list of duty occupations includes light infantry, artillery, reconnaissance, communications, nurse, and vehicle operator.

In terms of the geographic location of their final unit or the unit in which the interviewees spent most of their service years after basic training, the following provinces are represented: N. Hwanghae (two), S. Hwanghae (one), N. Hamgyong (one), S. Hamgyong (four), Gangwon (two), N. Pyongan (one), S. Pyongan (two), and Pyongyang (two).²⁰⁹ Four interviewees served in front-line units along the DMZ, and one served in a border guard unit along the Sino-North Korean border.

5.4. Official Information

“Official information” in this report refers to data, instructions, guidance, direction, and other formal information that KPA soldiers receive, process, and transmit day-to-day. The nature of how information flows in the KPA is generally understood. According to Bermudez, information flows up and orders flow down within the KPA's chain of command, with very little information shared horizontally, except at the very highest levels. This tight, vertical flow control is a means of “coup-proofing” the regime.²¹⁰

The unitary command and control mechanism merges the state and Party apparatus and is derived from North Korea's Constitution, which identifies the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission (State) as the “Supreme Commander” of the armed forces, and the Korean Workers' Party Charter, which identifies the supreme leader as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (Party).²¹¹ Kim Jong-un holds all of these positions and thus has total control of the KPA.

Acting under the control of the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), the General Political Bureau (GPB) ensures the downward flow and implementation of the Party's

207 One interviewee declined to provide their exact age.

208 One interviewee served in a unit under the Guard Command, and another was involved in various units responsible for internal security and defense issues.

209 One interviewee declined to disclose the geographic location of their unit(s).

210 Bermudez, “Information and the DPRK's Military and Power-Holding Elite,” in Oh and Hassig, eds., *North Korean Policy Elites*, I-S-2.

211 “General Staff Operations Bureau,” *North Korea Leadership Watch*, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/dprk-security-apparatus/general-staff-operations-bureau/>, accessed April 8, 2021.

decisions and directives for the political and ideological indoctrination of KPA members. GPB-assigned political officers are inserted in KPA units down to the company level. These political officers are responsible for guiding political and ideological indoctrination activities and conducting surveillance on officers and soldiers to ensure compliance with KWP policies.²¹²

The General Staff Department (GSD) executes the supreme leader's command authority under the thorough leadership of the Party. The GSD commands and directs subordinate units by establishing and executing war and peacetime operations and training plans for respective military headquarters as well as units and training centers at each level, and by participating in the preparation of orders issued annually by the Supreme Commander.²¹³ Annually, toward the end of November, a new "Training Order from the Commander-in-Chief" is issued to military forces through the GSD. This order establishes training timelines, doctrine, and guidelines for the upcoming year. The training order for 2021 establishes specific training criteria and is entitled, "Regarding the Tasks of Operations and Combat Politics Training in 2021 for the Korean People's Army, Strategic Force, Social Security Forces and Militia."²¹⁴

While the top-to-bottom nature of information flow in the KPA is generally understood, as outlined above, the day-to-day information practices, processes, and procedures of KPA soldiers at the unit level are less clear. The following subsections synthesize answers from the 16 North Korean escapees on questions that focused on information types, characteristics, processes, and procedures; information dissemination systems and soldier-accessible systems; and involved organizations. In terms of structure, the subsections are organized both spatially and by topic. First, information processing in the KPA is examined from top echelons to smaller units, and then between and within those units. Next, the topics of "corruption" and "foreign information" are investigated in the context of "official information."

5.4.1. *From Top Echelons to KPA Units*

Former company-grade officers and those with experience in the senior enlisted ranks—especially those who were directly involved in administrative tasks—provided detailed information on how information was communicated from the top echelons of the KPA and the Party to each unit. This was the case for both information pertaining to tasks and training and information relating to political indoctrination. Those with less experience and those who were not involved in administrative duties generally showed less familiarity with the specifics of how official information was transmitted from the highest levels to individual units.

Tasks and Training Orders: Interviewees confirmed that the General Staff Department and the Ministry of Defense (formerly the Ministry of People's Armed Forces) were primarily responsible for formulating and sending information about tasks and training down the chain of command to each unit.

212 "KPA General Political Bureau," *North Korea Leadership Watch*, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/dprk-security-apparatus/mpaf-general-political-department/>, accessed April 8, 2021.

213 Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 131.

214 Jeong Tae-Joo, "Kim Jong Un Issues New 'Training Order' to Strategic Force," *Daily NK*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-jong-un-issues-new-training-order-strategic-force/>, accessed April 9, 2021.

ARMY OF THE INDOCTRINATED

The Suryong, the Soldier, and Information in the KPA

Printed materials and classified documents are hand-delivered by designated messenger soldiers at each step of the chain of command, while time-sensitive communications are transmitted via morse code or by telephone. This was confirmed by interviewees who served in the 1980s, 2000s, and the 2010s.

Printed materials were transported from the corps to the brigade level by vehicle. Then, from the brigade to the battalion level, there were designated messengers [gi-tong-soo] who delivered printed documents by walking around on foot. Urgent messages are transmitted in wireless form via morse code...There was a communications officer at the battalion level. Only that officer could decode the messages. No one else could. When an encrypted message was received, that officer decoded the message and passed it on to us.
(Served until 1989)

There was a telephone at the battalion staff department, which was used for receiving instructions from brigade headquarters...while we were on base, orders were sent down by telephone.
(Served until 2004)

[Such information] was sent down through soldiers involved in communications. Information was also sent down by telephone and through [hand-delivered] mail.
(Served until 2009)

Each brigade has an encryption section and a communication section with attached officers for decrypting, encoding, and transmitting information.
(Served until 2010)

I had a friend who served as a messenger...the battalion messenger brings documents to the company. I am not familiar with the contents of these documents, but they likely contained information about orders. This information would then be conveyed [within the unit]. Documents are hand-delivered by messengers in the North Korean military. There are messengers that go between the battalion and the regiment, the regiment and the division, and the division and the corps.
(Served until 2014)

Some interviewees indicated that the KPA had adopted newer technology in more recent years to facilitate the sharing of information about tasks up and down the chain of command. The following interviewee, who served in the air force, indicated that video calls are now used to transmit information to KPA units. It is unclear, however, whether this practice has been adopted by other branches of the KPA.

It used to be the case that messengers would hand-deliver printed materials to the unit. Now, however, there are electronic video calls down to the regiment level. Regiment commanders would attend the conference calls hosted by the division. Also, there is now an intranet in the KPA. Documents are transmitted electronically in e-mail form. Messengers still hand-deliver newspapers and other various printed materials.
(Served until late 2010s)

Another interviewee with extensive experience in matters of internal security, both during (until mid-2000s) and after (mid-2000s to late 2010s) their service in the KPA, confirmed that newer technology has been adopted by the North Korean military.

There have been efforts to establish an intranet, but even so it is only used for exchanging minor documents, for sending and receiving reports on assigned tasks up and down the chain of command.
(Served until mid-2000s)

Despite these efforts, it appears that the KPA has not made a concerted effort to adopt advanced, state-of-the-art communications equipment across the board. The above interviewee gave the following assessment.

The KPA does not have the money. In contrast to sophisticated, high-tech means of communication, it is deliberately relying on conventional means. Morse code, for instance, is now obsolete in other countries. Unless they specifically train individuals for that purpose, countries with state-of-the-art communications equipment cannot decode Morse code. North Korea is exploiting this large technological gap to its advantage. It still insists on using conventional means such as landline telephones and Morse code...to avoid disruptions from jamming and electronic warfare.
(Served until mid-2000s)

5.4.2. Political Indoctrination Information

In the case of transmitting information relating to political indoctrination down to each unit, interviewees confirmed that the GPB is primarily responsible. They also indicated that this material was essentially uniform in its content across the entire KPA, and that it was hand-delivered by messengers in printed form.

This material originates from the KPA General Political Bureau, which transmits it to the corps political department, and then in turn to the brigade, battalion, and company level political departments.
(Interview 7)

Political indoctrination materials are published in printed booklet form. Messengers sort and send down printed material from the brigade to the regiment, from the regiment to the battalion, and then again from the battalion to the company level. The delivery of these materials is confirmed with a signature by the company political officer.
(Interview 14)

5.4.3. Between KPA Units

Interviewees confirmed that the KPA chain of command did not allow for any horizontal transmission or distribution of information between units, except for limited training or tactical purposes. Information is strictly compartmentalized and communicated in a vertical fashion.

Units are strictly separated from each other. Two artillery units, if they belong under different commands, would not know very much about each other's tasks and responsibilities.

(Interview 4)

Horizontal sharing of information is impossible, considering the characteristics of the KPA as a whole. Let's suppose that there are two or three battalions under a regiment. These battalion commanders would not need to share or discuss anything, since they would have received exactly the same information. There is simply no possibility for them to discuss information with each other on an individual basis.

(Interview 12)

It is possible during joint exercises, for instance between artillery and infantry units when they practice capturing a hill. Also, front-line units can urgently request supporting fire from each other in response to enemy provocations. There aren't other situations when information would be shared horizontally between units.

(Interview 7)

There is no system in place for horizontal transmission of information between units. Instead, [in-person] exercises are held among officers at every level of the chain of command: division commanders, corps commanders, corps staff, and division staff. They receive lectures on tactical issues and participate in training exercises—command post exercises that are conducted without soldiers present. Staff officers are presented with a hypothetical situation, and then they formulate operational plans for that situation, which are ranked and evaluated. Operational capabilities are improved in this fashion...the infrastructure is not there, for instance, to enable two-way communication between corps commanders about operational issues.

(Interview 11)

5.4.4. **Within a KPA Unit**

Daily Tasks & Responsibilities: The following account, provided by an interviewee who served in the 1980s, illustrates a typical day in the life of a KPA soldier.

The daily schedule has been fixed and passed down since the KPA was formed in 1948: wake up at 5:00; assembly and roll call outside at 5:05; exercise until 5:30; clean and organize barracks until morning formation at 7:00; prepare for the day's training from 8:00 to 8:20; political indoctrination from 8:20 to 10:20; then morning training and lunch; target practice from 13:00 to 14:00; cleaning personal weapons from 14:00 to 15:00; afternoon training [tactical exercises] until 19:00; dinner from 19:00 to 20:00; 'cultural life' from 20:00 to 21:00; and evening formation from 21:00 to 21:30.

(Served until 1989)

Only a few interviewees provided a detailed description of their day-to-day schedule. However, it appears that this schedule was adjusted in some cases depending on the nature of the soldier's duty occupation.

After completing overnight watch duty at the guard posts, soldiers ate breakfast from 7:00 to 7:30 and then slept from 7:40 to 12:30. They then ate lunch at 12:30 and participated in political indoctrination for two hours in

the afternoon before completing other tasks or training. They would then go out for watch duty again in the evening. This cycle would repeat every day.
(Served until 2010)

The day-to-day operations of a KPA unit as a whole are captured succinctly in the following remarks.

There are fixed regulations regarding [a soldier's] daily schedule. Specifically, there is a standardized schedule for the winter season and one for the summer season. The only difference is that wake-up time is one hour later in the winter... The daily schedule is executed entirely by the chief master sergeant. From the morning to the evening, this standardized schedule must be followed according to regulations.

Then there are other tasks that [KPA units] commonly undertake. These include various economic activities and construction-related assignments. Such tasks are executed in line with each unit's assigned schedule, while internal matters relating to daily life within the unit are overseen by the chief master sergeant. A company is the basic organizing unit in this regard...

In addition to the four basic Ministry of Defense regulations [formation, living quarters, discipline, tactics], there are manuals for each duty occupation. There are also manuals for each role [rank]—company commander, political guidance officer, chief master sergeant. These are all fixed roles with weekly, monthly, yearly, quarterly requirements that are mandatory in nature.

Then there are orders regarding tasks that fall outside of these specified roles... It is not possible for a company to freely decide the tasks that it will undertake. Each company submits up the chain of command a daily task report that proposes the tasks that it will execute the next day—company to battalion, battalion to regiment, regiment to division. The daily task report also includes information on the tasks that were completed that day. After superior units review this report, a 'daily order' is sent down at the beginning of the day. These must be executed and reported on by the evening. A company can execute the tasks that it proposed only if it was approved [overnight] at higher levels. Responsiveness to these daily orders is a basic requirement of the KPA.
(Served until mid-2000s)

Another interviewee who served until 2010 also stated that there were fixed regulations regarding a soldier's daily schedule.

The chief master sergeant (*sa-gwan-jang*) holds primary responsibility for executing the soldiers' daily schedule and overseeing relevant administrative matters. In most cases, interviewees reported that soldiers received verbal instructions. Information was passed in printed form only down to the company commander or company political officer (Interview 12).

There was some variation among interviewees regarding the number of formations that were held every day. Most reported that there were two: once in the morning, and once before lights out. During the evening formation, unit leader(s) discussed major events of the day, addressed any issues regarding life within the unit (e.g., food quality), and provided an evaluation of performance during that day's training (Interviews 2, 4, 7, 13). Interviewees reported that there were also frequent inspections throughout the day (Interviews 2, 12, 13). Some units were not able

to hold formations due to the nature of their tasks, such as nurses engaged in patient care and soldiers at guard posts on front-line watch duty (Interview 5, 14, 15).

Examples of daily tasks included repairing encampment positions, chopping wood for kindling, and fetching water; overnight watch duty at a guard post; providing in-patient care and outpatient services; and transporting fuel between airfields and refueling aircraft.

One interviewee reported that they spent most of their time on various non-military tasks that were required to support the unit—such as farming, repair, and construction—and another reported that this was generally true of KPA units as a whole (Interview II, 12). Most interviewees, however, stated that they spent most of their time conducting tasks related to their duty occupation and participating in political indoctrination sessions.

Training: In several instances, the company commander was identified as the individual with primary responsibility for communicating orders related to training (Interview 2, 4, 8, 10). Examples of training activities included parachute jumps, infiltration, and sniper practice; martial arts and hand-to-hand combat; and target practice and studying formulas for firing artillery. Most interviewees also referenced the KPA-wide winter and summer training cycles, which are formally initiated with an order from the Supreme Commander.

Political Indoctrination: During ten years of service in the KPA, a soldier receives 10,000 hours of political indoctrination. Given 10,000 hours, a lie can be transformed into the truth.

Political indoctrination has been formally institutionalized by law, and this block of time cannot be violated for any reason whatsoever...regardless of where you may be in the morning, two hours of political indoctrination are required. In physiological terms, it is said that a person's mind is most alert between 9 and 11 in the morning. Thus, individuals must attend political indoctrination at the time of day when their minds are most alert. This practice has been regularized and institutionalized.

(Interview II)

Political indoctrination is a central element in the life of a KPA soldier. These sessions were reportedly held for two hours each day, for five or six days every week. Most interviewees identified the company-level political guidance officer as the individual with primary responsibility for conducting political indoctrination sessions within a unit.

According to one interviewee, only 7-8% of soldiers in a company (10 to 15) are typically KWP members, and the rest (approximately 130) belong to the Youth League.²¹⁵ The chief master sergeant doubles as the cell secretary for the Youth League and conducts indoctrination sessions based on materials received from the company's political officer (Interview II). In situations where the company's political officer could not be present—while on watch duty at a guard post, for instance—the platoon leader conducted these sessions based on materials received from the political officer. This sometimes resulted in sessions being compressed into less than an hour

215 The Youth League, formally known as the Kim Il-sung-ist Kim Jong-il-ist Youth League, is a nationwide organization used to control and oversee the political and organizational life of all youth in North Korea who are at or above the age of 14. See Ministry of Unification, *Understanding North Korea: 2020*, 210-11.

(Interview 8). In units without a company-level political officer, the individual who acts as the cell secretary conducts political indoctrination (Interview I2).

The interviewees reported that the political indoctrination sessions were primarily held in the form of a lecture, with soldiers reading and discussing content from printed materials. Some also recalled that soldiers had to periodically take written tests to assess their recall and understanding of the material (Interview 7, I3). One interviewee recalled watching films as part of the indoctrination sessions about the Korean War that stressed the superiority of the KPA (Interview 2).

The material delivered at the political indoctrination sessions invariably focused on the ideological achievements and the biography of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un. Interviewees also reported a strong anti-U.S. emphasis. The message that “U.S. imperialists are sworn enemies that must be crushed” is the basis for the KPA’s existence (Interview I1). In this vein, soldiers were also taught that “a wolf cannot change into a sheep” (Interview 7). The sessions sometimes included information on Kim Jong-un’s recent on-site guidance visits (Interview 4).

Two interviewees reported that the material delivered at the political indoctrination sessions varies considerably depending on whether it is intended for officers or those in the enlisted ranks.

The content delivered at the political indoctrination sessions varies depending on whether it is aimed at general-grade officers, officers, or those in the enlisted ranks. Those in the enlisted ranks are not allowed to view material that is intended for officers...One of my friends served as a political guidance officer, and I had a chance to see the material that was delivered to officers. There are contradictions between this material and the material that is intended for soldiers. For example, soldiers are taught that Kim Jong-un loves them and that officers must do their utmost to care for them. However, Kim Jong-un instructs officers that ‘it is past time to merely use words’ and that ‘soldiers must be harshly punished when it is necessary.’ It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are many such contradictions.

(Interview I2)

Separate compilations are assembled for soldiers, officers, general-grade officers, and for general use...There is a tremendous difference between the material used for soldiers and that used for officers. The material for soldiers reflects what soldiers need to know, and the material for officers covers issues that commanding officers must consider. Moreover, the material also varies depending on whether it is used for those in administrative positions, those involved in political work, or those involved in military security...

For example, after an armed provocation by North Korea in the West Sea in the early 2000s, units received official political material about the incident in an effort to prevent soldiers from being swayed by rumors filtering into the country. Soldiers were...basically taught that the numerically, technologically, and ideologically superior troops of the KPA achieved victory by displaying great courage in sinking ROK vessels. However, officers’ material focused on operational errors that needed to be corrected: failure to conduct a prompt headcount resulting in delayed mobilization, insufficient fuel onboard the vessels, or agitation among soldiers. These issues are important for officers, who need to manage soldiers.

(Interview I4)

Most interviewees reported that the content or intensity of political indoctrination sessions did not fundamentally change during their service years. One recalled, however, that the

intensity of political indoctrination increased noticeably for around two weeks as KPA units began the nationwide seasonal training cycles (Interview 4). There were also some changes in response to domestic or foreign events. Material emphasizing the greatness of Kim Jong-un was newly introduced to the KPA after he was designated as the successor, a year before this was formally revealed to the North Korean population (Interview 5). Developments in inter-Korean relations, such as President Kim Dae-Jung's visit to Pyongyang and the Battle of Yeonpyeong, prompted an emphasis on preparations to defeat and conquer South Korea in the event of a war (Interview 2). Two interviewees stated that the political indoctrination of soldiers has been intensified in recent years due to conscripts having greater exposure to South Korean and other foreign content before entering the KPA (Interview 12, 15).

Management of Printed Materials: Rules and regulations in printed form are kept by or provided to KPA units as needed to carry out necessary tasks and orders. Two interviewees gave detailed insight into what materials are available, who is allowed to obtain these materials, and how access to these materials is regulated.

The GPB and the Ministry of Defense distribute basic reference manuals—including the four key regulations of the KPA (formation, living quarters, discipline, tactics)—to divisions/brigades, regiments, battalions, companies, and all the way down to platoons. Each copy is stamped and registered. New copies are provided once every five years or so, when the copies become worn out. Our unit also had hard copies of a thick reference manual on tactics [relating to the unit's tasks]. Every platoon has five or six copies of this tactical manual. They can be accessed only by the platoon leader. Soldiers were only allowed to copy certain sections by hand as needed, and they would keep these handwritten copies in their personal lockers.

(Interview 14)

The KPA has its own publishing company. Published materials [including manuals relating to duty occupation and roles by rank] are strictly for internal use only. A finite number of printed copies are published and distributed to divisions, regiments, and battalions. For units at the battalion level or above, there are designated personnel [officers] specifically responsible for regulating and controlling access to classified materials. Each unit is provided only with the range and number of printed materials that are appropriate for that level. From the moment these materials are distributed by the General Staff Department, each copy is registered, and the number of copies is specified for each unit...

Units below the battalion level are only able to borrow printed copies. Officers who wish to borrow these materials must present appropriate identification to the relevant personnel, who records the date and condition upon checkout and upon receipt. If classified material is leaked or if a printed copy is lost, that officer is held responsible. The management of printed material may be a little old-fashioned, but it is very strict. The KPA also restricts what materials can be accessed by rank. Officers at the company level, for instance, are only able to access a specified set of materials. The set of accessible material would again vary for battalion commanders.

(Interview 11)

The latter interviewee also added that there is now a considerable amount of official material distributed in e-book form, which are transferred between individuals using encrypted USB drives.

Access to Information Systems: Taken together, the interviewees' responses indicate that soldiers generally did not have access to sophisticated information technology systems. To the extent that access was provided, it was to facilitate the execution of tasks related to their duty occupation. For example, an individual who was involved in a special operations unit was provided with a small earpiece while participating in sniper training (Interview 1). An interviewee who served in the 1980s was able to use wireless transmitters and receivers while recording and reporting on incursions of foreign aircraft into North Korean airspace (Interview 16). Two individuals who served in the front-line area along the DMZ—one in the 1980s, another in the 2010s—both had access to a basic phone that could be used to urgently report incidents up the chain of command (Interview 7, 8). Another interviewee stated that ordinary soldiers did not have access to telephones, and that a specialized communications platoon from the battalion would facilitate communication using hand-held radios during training exercises (Interview 13).

In general, it appears that officers have greater access to communications technology. One interviewee noted that only the platoon leader and the deputy platoon leader could use the telephone that provided a direct line to battalion headquarters. Only the guard post chief on duty (squad leader) was permitted to receive calls (Interview 8). An individual who served in the early 2010s stated that the company commander used a mobile phone to communicate non-sensitive information (Interview 4). Similarly, another individual who served within the past decade noted that officers used mobile phones that were specially designated for use within the military to facilitate command and control within the unit. These phones could not connect to civilian mobile networks (Interview 12).

5.4.5. *Official Access to Foreign Information*

Only two interviewees reported first-hand experience of being able to access foreign information as part of their official duties. One individual saw short videos, movies, and news clips about South Korea as part of their training, but only to enhance their understanding of South Korean society for carrying out reconnaissance-related tasks (Interview 6).

Another individual, who served as a military security officer, indicated that high-ranking officers were provided with official compilations of reference materials about international affairs and foreign military capabilities:

The KPA provides reference material in newspaper form.²¹⁶ Only officers at the division or brigade level and above—including the unit commander, political officer, and chief staff officer—can access these materials...they contain information about international affairs and provide analysis regarding political and military affairs, for example, about U.S. nuclear submarines, Israeli intelligence capabilities, or South Korean [capabilities]. There is one such paper each day and the officers must return the seven papers for that week every Saturday. Unit commanders, political officers, and military security officers used and applied this information to their subordinate units as necessary.

(Served until 2010)

216 Based on their response, this individual may have been referring to a newsletter.

Some interviewees had indirect knowledge of units that were able to access external information. One was aware of military units tasked with special construction projects, such as Changjeon Street in Pyongyang, that utilized foreign contacts for purchasing construction materials (Interview 4). Another interviewee was vaguely aware that there was a unit under the division command that used computers and had some access to external information (Interview 12). One interviewee stated that nurses at a military hospital were aware of the existence of covert operatives sent to South Korea and other foreign countries because they sometimes provided medical care for the family members of these operatives (Interview 15).

Several interviewees referenced the Reconnaissance General Bureau, including its cyberwarfare (hacker) units, when asked if they were aware of any units with official access to the outside world (Interview 2, 4, 11). Not all of them, however, were aware of this information while they were still in North Korea.

5.4.6. *Corruption & Official Channels of Information*

Interviewees who served in the KPA during the 1980s all stated that systemic corruption was not a major issue during their service years (Interview 7, 10, 16). Others who served more recently, including in the mid-to-late 1990s and the 2000s, also did not personally encounter corruption-related issues during their time in the North Korean military (Interview 2, 13). However, every other interviewee was able to recount direct or indirect experiences of endemic corruption in the KPA. Collectively, the interviews suggest that corruption has been widespread in the KPA since at least the mid-2000s.

The North Korean regime would cease to exist without bribes. Those who believe that corruption undermines the regime are mistaken. It is the bedrock that sustains the apparatus of the state. If there were to be a crackdown on corruption on the grounds that it was anti-revolutionary, the state could not continue to function. The wages paid by the state are pitifully small. Who in their right mind would work for the regime if that was all they earned? It is not possible to speak of integrity or uprightness on an empty stomach. Socialism would crumble if bribes were not permitted. Kim Jong-un is not unaware of the corruption that takes place. He is allowing cadre to take as much money as they please, if they defend and protect his hold on power... Corruption is now a societal norm in North Korea. It is endemic. People do not feel that it is wrong or improper.
(Interview 11)

As illustrated by the examples below, it appears that the primary effect of corruption on the flow of official information up and down the KPA chain of command is to cover up improper practices, failures to carry out orders from superior units, and disciplinary violations.

There are instances where orders from superior units are not executed. It is very common for units to only go through the motions of following orders when there is an official inspection. As an example [of corruption], during my time in the unit, my main responsibility was to assist the unit commander with non-military, private errands. It goes without saying that such a position does not formally exist in the military. The GPB and other superior units were not aware, but there was awareness of this practice up to the division level. Because commanders have trouble

maintaining their livelihood, individual soldiers are assigned to help commanders with such errands. These soldiers are completely exempt from training.

(Interview 3)

On the day of Kim Jong-il's funeral procession, a fire broke out at our unit, which is located in Pyongyang. The portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il that had been placed in the soldiers' barracks were lost to the fire. This was a grave incident that would have been punished harshly. However, our unit was an independent unit that reported directly to the branch command. Because of this, the party secretary decided to cover up the incident and did not report it up the chain of command....nobody faced punishment.

(Interview 9)

I was involved in managing logistics and supplies at my unit. Investigators from the GPB would come to the unit to conduct an inspection of the division's supplies. If someone had mismanaged the supplies, shouldn't these officials punish those responsible? Instead, even these investigators are tasked by their superiors with extracting a certain amount of monetary benefits when they are sent to carry out inspections. Unless the misconduct is especially severe or political in nature, officials simply look the other way.

(Interview 12)

5.5. Unofficial Information

With the emergence of the so-called *jangmadang* (markets) generation following the “Arduous March” of the 1990s, there now exists a robust demand for foreign content among North Koreans.²¹⁷ An influential 2012 study of North Korea's media environment concludes that “the regime can and will likely continue to crack down on the influx of outside information, [but] it seems true retrenchment is not possible.”²¹⁸ A 2014 analysis similarly notes that “the influx of foreign culture into North Korea is undeniably creating fissures in the regime's strict system of control.”²¹⁹ Moreover, the introduction of mobile phones and telecommunications services has not only altered the way that North Koreans consume and communicate information,²²⁰ but also enabled new forms of innovative economic activity.²²¹

As reflected by the passage of the “anti-reactionary law” during the 12th Session of the 14th SPA in December 2020, the North Korean regime continues to make deliberate efforts to exert control over the media environment and restrict unauthorized access to external information. One recent study concludes that North Korea is entering “a new era of strongly state-influenced

217 Jieun Baek, *North Korea's Hidden Revolution: How the Information Underground is Transforming a Closed Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

218 Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, *A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment* (InterMedia, 2012), 3.

219 Kang Dong-Wan, “A Study on the Introduction of Foreign Culture into North Korea and Changes to the North Korean Society: with an Interview Survey with North Koreans in a Third Country,” *The Journal of the Humanities for Unification* 60 (2014): 198

220 Yonho Kim, *Cell Phones in North Korea: Has North Korea Entered the Telecommunications Revolution?* (Washington, D.C.: US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2014).

221 Yonho Kim, “North Korea's Mobile Telecommunications and Private Transportation Services in the Kim Jong-un Era,” *HRNK Insider*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.hrnkinsider.org/2019/01/north-koreas-mobile-telecommunications.html>, accessed May 31, 2021.

digitization that is characterized by both sophisticated crackdowns on illegal media content and the introduction of legal digital communications channels.”²²² Upon examining recent steps taken by the regime to exert control over the information environment, Williams warns that “the State is far from giving up control over what North Koreans watch and listen to.”²²³

A 2015 analysis of leaked internal documents provides a snapshot of the extent to which unofficial, foreign content has permeated the KPA during the Kim Jong-un era. The study concludes that “individuals of diverse ranks and responsibilities within the KPA are watching South Korean video content,” including military security officers.²²⁴ Second, the authors report that “the means [devices] with which South Korean video content is being consumed is also being diversified,” ranging from mobile phones to USB drives and DVDs.²²⁵ Lastly, the regime acknowledges—at least in its internal assessments—that there are limits to the extent to which it can monitor and restrict the consumption of South Korean content.²²⁶

The responses presented in this section largely corroborate these findings. Against the backdrop of a continually evolving information environment in North Korea, this section examines the influx of unofficial, foreign information into the country as it pertains to the KPA. Given that the latest year of escape from North Korea among the 16 interviewees is 2019, the interview responses compiled herein do not account for the most recent developments, including the passage of the “anti-reactionary law” and the creation of the Military Government Guidance Department in 2020. Nevertheless, the interviews provide valuable insight into how the changing information environment in North Korea has affected the KPA.

5.5.1. *Entry and Circulation of Outside Information*

Routes of Entry: Although the interviewees were selected based on their prior experience in the KPA, they also represent a small but meaningful cross-section of individuals with both civilian and military experiences in North Korean society. As such, they were also able to provide insights into how outside information enters North Korea, and how it is circulated inside the country.

The Sino-North Korean border is a key entry point not only for foreign content, but also the electronic devices that are used to consume this content.

Foreign content is often brought into North Korea from China by smugglers, first through border cities such as Sinuiju and then into inland areas such as Pyongyang.

(Interview 3)

222 Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee and Seamus Tuohy, *Compromising Connectivity: Information Dynamics between the State and Society in a Digitizing North Korea* (InterMedia, 2017), 2.

223 Martyn Williams, *Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), 44.

224 Kang Dong-Wan and Hyun-Jung Kim, “A Study on Influence of South Korean Visual Media in The North Korean Army and North Korea's Management Capability,” *Unification and Peace Studies* 7.1 (2015): 128

225 *Ibid.*, 129.

226 *Ibid.*, 129-30.

Foreign content enters North Korea through major border cities such as Sinuiju and Hyesan by smugglers.
(Interview 12)

South Korean content comes into North Korea across the border through smuggling...for example, USB drives or small storage cards that hold South Korean TV dramas would sometimes be hidden inside pockets of clothes.
(Interview 15)

The CD/DVD players that are sold in North Korea come from China, and the same is true of the CDs and DVDs [that contain foreign content].
(Interview 2)

One interviewee provided a fascinating anecdote about the role of KPA border guards in enabling smugglers to take items across the Sino-North Korean border, based on information they had heard from a relative who was directly involved in this smuggling route.

I heard that soldiers posted as border guards make enough money during their service years to prepare for marriage... North Koreans have to make a living by going back and forth across the border. This is simply not possible unless they bribe the border guards. I have a relative who was a smuggler. This relative personally knew three border guards and gave very large sums of money to these three individuals—specifically, 30% of the profits [from smuggling]. Because the soldiers couldn't take cash on base, this relative stored the bribes (in RMB) in carrier bags at home. It used to be the case that border guards made a lot of money during their service years this way. In recent years, however, since recruits are eager to be posted as border guards, the KPA moves border guards to different locations once every three years. My relative said that this made it difficult to smuggle goods across the border.
(Served until 2012)

While most outside information originates in China, this is not the only route through which North Koreans can access foreign content.

Since 2013 or 2014, foreign dramas and movies have been widely circulated in Pyongyang and the southern regions of the country, including Hwanghae province...much of this information comes in through fishermen, who pick up plastic bottles containing SD cards in the West Sea.
(Interview 6)

Role of Markets: There was some variation between interviewees in terms of whether the markets still played an important role in the circulation of foreign content within North Korea, possibly because some interviewees escaped the country much earlier than others. Most, however, agreed that it would now be risky to openly display foreign content at the market. They would be passed on or provided only to trusted individuals and networks.

The jangmadang does not play an important role in this regard. Foreign content is passed on from individual to individual, only between people who trust each other. It is simply not possible to openly display foreign content at the markets. Even items or products that are produced in South Korea are not sold openly.
(Left N. Korea in 2019)

It would be difficult to distribute such material through the markets. Almost anyone who tries to do so would be caught. When foreign content is brought in by fishermen, they pass it on to their personal networks.

(Left N. Korea in 2018)

Sellers would openly display officially authorized content, but they would also keep foreign content, such as South Korean dramas. They might recommend it to repeat customers, but they would make it very clear that they would not be held responsible if the customer were to be caught watching this content.

(Left N. Korea in 2016)

Markets play the most important role. Outside information is extremely valuable in North Korea because it is a window to the outside world, which otherwise cannot be seen or heard. Since the regime deals harshly with foreign content, individuals may have to risk their life for it. Even so, individuals who need the money still distribute foreign content at the market because they know how valuable it is.

(Left N. Korea in 2014)

Several interviewees also confirmed that the KPA does not possess the authority to restrict or otherwise intervene directly in the *jangmadang* (Interview 3, 4, 5, 12). Furthermore, seven interviewees explicitly stated that the KPA does not play a direct role in restricting civilians' access to outside information. To the extent that the KPA is involved in such efforts, it is only restricted to the border region with China (Interview 4).

5.5.2. Initial Training

Given the widespread circulation of South Korean culture in the country, it is common for North Korea's youth to enter the KPA after already having been exposed to such content. This is evident from the responses provided by some of the younger interviewees. One response suggests that the KPA may have institutionalized new measures in reaction to this trend.

I met fellow recruits from Pyongyang or Jagang province who had already seen South Korean dramas or heard South Korean songs before entering the military, while they were still students. They would sing these songs and talk about South Korea.

(Entered KPA in 2012)

Nowadays, nobody enters the KPA without having been exposed to Hallyu [South Korean culture]. Everyone, without exception, has encountered at least one South Korean song or TV drama...During basic training, someone sang [the melody of] a South Korean song. When the commander asked the recruit what song it was, they lied that it was a Chinese song. In situations like this, recruits might also pretend that they had come up with the melody themselves. I also knew that it was a song from South Korea, but if I said that 'it's a South Korean song,' I would get into trouble, so we all pretended not to know.

(Entered KPA in 2006)

There are a lot of youth who join the KPA after having watched South Korean movies. One of the first things they must do upon entering boot camp is to write a list of 'impure' video content they have seen—U.S., South Korean, and Japanese content prohibited by the party—up to that point. They must make a full confession of the [foreign]

video content they have seen. They are then told that their past transgressions are forgiven, and that any future violations will be punished severely. Moreover, they are warned that they will face punishment if their confession is later found to be incomplete...For example, there was an instance in which two friends had watched a movie together. They were each sent to different units. One confessed to watching that movie, but the other did not. After comparing the two lists, the person who did not make a full confession was punished.
(Entered KPA in 2012)

5.5.3. *Exposure to Unofficial Information at KPA Units*

Information Types & Devices: Geographic location appears to be a key factor in shaping individuals' opportunities to encounter unofficial, foreign information. Among individuals who primarily served in the 1980s, those who served in units located along the southern coast of North Korea, close to the 38th parallel, stated that they frequently saw paper leaflets during their time in the KPA (Interview 10, 16). Interviewees who served in front-line units along the DMZ all reported seeing leaflets sent from South Korea, as well as being exposed to loudspeaker broadcasts across the inter-Korean border when these speakers were in operation (Interview 1, 3, 7, 8).

One interviewee who served at a border guard unit along the Sino-North Korean border indicated that they had been exposed to South Korean and Chinese dramas and movies, as well as the Bible and local radio broadcasts from the Yanbian Korean autonomous prefecture. This interviewee accessed such content from CDs and USB drives, using "Notel" devices and CD players to consume this content (Interview 14).²²⁷

Those who primarily completed their service within Pyongyang's city limits could readily access foreign content and the requisite devices needed to consume this content, befitting the city's extremely privileged status in North Korea.²²⁸ One interviewee copied South Korean music onto an internal storage chip in an MP4 player, and another used their mobile phone to watch content that was loaded onto SD cards (Interview 9, 15).

Interviewees who served in isolated units in inland areas had little or no access to outside information unless they returned home on leave or temporarily went off base to neighboring areas. One such interviewee was able to watch South Korean movies on CDs or DVDs in the 2000s, but only in civilian households off base. Another interviewee who served until 2004 stated that they overheard passengers talking about people escaping to China while heading back home on a train on official leave, but they did not have meaningful access to outside information otherwise (Interview 2, 13).

It appears that access to outside information has improved even in inland areas far away from the borders during the 2010s, likely reflecting the penetration of markets and person-to-person information-sharing networks into these areas as well. These younger interviewees reported watching movies on a mobile phone using SD cards and plugging in a USB drive into a Notel device (Interview 6, 12).

227 For a description of "Notel" devices, see James Pearson, "The \$50 device that symbolizes a shift in North Korea," *Reuters*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-change-insight/the-50-device-that-symbolizes-a-shift-in-north-korea-idUSKBNOMM2UZ20150327>. Accessed May 31, 2021.

228 See Collins, *Pyongyang Republic*.

Lastly, two interviewees reported being able to use communications devices in their military equipment to tune into unauthorized foreign radio broadcasts, but it is unclear whether this practice is widespread (Interview 3, 10).

Duty Occupation & Rank: The nature of a soldier's day-to-day responsibilities, as well as his or her rank, appear to have an important impact on shaping opportunities to access or encounter outside information.

Once a soldier develops an interest in outside information, there are times during which he or she engages in individualized tasks, such as chopping wood out in the mountains. Because no one is closely monitoring them during these times, soldiers can try to search for leaflets or listen to audio content on MP3 players.

(Interview 3)

Those who are involved in securing and managing supplies and logistics have greater latitude than others because of the nature of their work. They go to farms to work out deals with farmers, and they also meet with traders while carrying out their duties. In some sense, these individuals are essentially merchants, and so they have many opportunities to encounter outside information.

(Interview 5)

Soldiers assigned to highly individualized duties that allow for some 'free' time, such as acting as drivers for officers, have many opportunities to consume outside information.

(Interview 6)

Soldiers that carry out individualized duties, such as personal drivers for the division or regiment commander, can access and consume outside information if they are interested and curious.

(Interview 12)

In terms of rank, those in the senior enlisted ranks typically have more opportunities to access outside information than those in the lower enlisted ranks. Officers typically have more opportunities to obtain and consume outside information than those in the enlisted ranks.

There was a clear difference [by rank]. Higher-ranking soldiers with more years under their belt, such as squad leaders, have more free time on their hands. When they return to the company barracks, they also have more opportunities to go off base to private households. As for officers, perhaps this may not apply to the platoon leader, but company commanders and above, including political guidance officers, certainly have more opportunities to obtain outside information.

(Interview 8)

When officers returned to their hometown, for example to Sinuiju or [cities in] the border area...they would be influenced by the latest local or South Korean fashion and culture and bring this back to their families upon returning to the unit.

(Interview 3)

Sharing between Individuals: Most interviewees indicated that soldiers would be extremely cautious about sharing outside information with others within the unit due to strict internal

mechanisms of monitoring and control. Such information would typically be shared or discussed only among a very small number of trusted friends.

5.5.4. *Indoctrination & Mechanisms of Internal Control*

Political Indoctrination:

In 2018, a lieutenant colonel [jung-jwa] from the Military Security Command came to our unit to give a lecture. The lecture described an incident in which many soldiers who had seen illegal movies—South Korean and American movies—were arrested and awaiting execution. The date of the execution was set, and the soldiers' parents had come as well. Shortly before the soldiers were to be executed, Kim Jong-un sent an order cancelling the execution and gave the soldiers a second chance. The soldiers cried tears of gratitude and vowed never to watch such movies again. It was very clear what message this lecture was intended to convey to the soldiers in the audience.

(Interview 12)

One of the main mechanisms of control used by the KPA to counter the influence of unofficial, foreign content is political indoctrination. According to one interviewee who served in the 2000s:

The material used for political indoctrination spoke of the 'yellow winds of capitalism' and mentioned foreign films. Soldiers were taught that anyone who encountered such content or became aware of someone who watched them should immediately report such incidents, and that any violations would be dealt with severely. This was frequently emphasized in indoctrination sessions.

(Interview 2)

An interviewee who served in the front-line area in the 2010s stated that soldiers were taught during their initial training how to deal with any leaflet balloons that they came across.

If soldiers see or discover a leaflet, they must not touch it or read it. Instead, they must report it immediately to military security. Subsequently, the military security officer would bring several personnel to the scene, collect the leaflets, and then burn them.

(Interview 3)

Another interviewee who served in an inland area during a similar period added that leaflet balloons were explicitly addressed in political indoctrination sessions.

We were taught during indoctrination sessions that leaflets were enemy propaganda, designed to spread lies and topple our socialist system. Soldiers are also taught that if they touch the leaflets, then their hands will become contaminated with an infectious agent. Similarly, soldiers are told that they will die if they eat any food items that came over [with the leaflets]. Many soldiers genuinely believe this.

(Interview 12)

Several other interviewees, ranging from those who served in the 1980s to those who served in the 2010s, all provided a strikingly consistent response with regards to what soldiers were taught about leaflets—that they were covered with deadly poison, and that soldiers should immediately report any such items to the appropriate authorities.

Relevant Institutions & Actors: When asked about the individuals or institutions with responsibility for ensuring that soldiers and officers did not access foreign content, most interviewees pointed to the military security officer(s) in their unit. The political officer was mentioned in a few instances, but the interviewees' responses collectively indicate that the MSC (군 보위부) is primarily in charge of investigating incidents or violations related to unauthorized foreign materials, including the discovery of leaflets and leaflet balloons.

Specifically, an interviewee with close knowledge of military security institutions provided a detailed account of how military security officers monitored their unit with a network of informants.

At our unit, a company consisted of 100 to 120 soldiers, with each platoon consisting of around 30 soldiers. There were two military security officers for the company: the responsible security guidance officer, and the company internal guidance officer. If the former officer oversees the first and third platoons, the latter would oversee the second platoon. Every squad [within the platoons] has one informant who gathers information on the soldiers' ideological attitudes, the unit's internal situation, and the external [foreign] situation. This information would be used to prevent potential defections or assess escape risk [among soldiers].

(Interview 14)

Soldiers are aware of the presence of these informants, as indicated by the following:

Within the platoon, there were informants who specifically reported on the political attitudes of all soldiers. We knew the identity of one of these informants, but we didn't know who the other two were. Soldiers with many years of service—those who had served as squad leaders for ten years or more—would be able to tell who the informants were, but those with less experience could not. Our squad leader would tell us during the daily evening self-criticism sessions to be extremely careful with our words. That was what our squad leader always emphasized the most—'your short [careless] tongue could strangle your long neck.'

(Interview 8)

In addition to the network of informants within the unit, interviewees also provided other examples of institutionalized measures to monitor individuals with respect to the consumption of unofficial, foreign content.

There is a '109 Group' within the military as well, tasked with enforcing controls related to outside information. These task forces got their name because the order instructing their formation was given on October 9th. The group is formed from several officers who already have roles within the unit, such as the division's operations officer. There is a high risk of cover-ups if the group conducts home inspections of their own subordinates, so the units inspect each other. In other words, the 1st Division's group inspects those in the 2nd Division, the 2nd Division

inspects the 3rd Division, and the 3rd Division inspects the 1st Division. This is to ensure that the inspections are conducted thoroughly.

(Interview 12)

This interviewee further added that there are frequent inspections—almost weekly—of officers' homes to inspect what video content is being consumed at their households. During these inspections, any items that are even slightly suspect on ideological grounds are immediately seized.

Punishments: There was a consensus among the interviewees that any violations relating to foreign content, no matter how trivial they may seem, would be regarded with the utmost severity. Most agreed that individuals of higher rank, all else equal, would face harsher punishments.

One interviewee who was detained in a political prison camp prior to their escape from North Korea gave the following account:

When I was at the political prison camp, I knew two fellow prisoners—former company commanders—who had been arrested because they were caught watching South Korean TV programs as they served in their front-line units.

Military security considers the consumption of South Korean content to be an extremely severe violation. For example, the severity of the violation would vary depending on whether someone watched an American movie or a South Korean movie. The latter is regarded as an especially serious ideological threat. This is true today, and it was true in [the 1980s] as well.

(Escaped N. Korea in 2003)

However, anecdotes provided by the interviewees suggest that bribes can be used to prevent or reduce punishments for relatively “minor” violations.

Unless the violation is anti-revolutionary or extremely political in nature, bribes can be used to avoid punishment. For example, I once went off base (on leave) with our squad leader in Pyongyang. We were walking toward a subway entrance when we were stopped by a police officer. The squad leader had been talking on the phone, and the police officer asked to see his phone. An SD card had been left plugged in, and South Korean music was found on the storage device. The squad leader panicked, and the police officer asked him to go to immediately to the police station. The squad leader then called his girlfriend, who brought 300 U.S. dollars to give to the police officer. This was not a small amount of money at the time. The police officer overlooked the incident and let us go on our way.

(Interview 9)

At our unit, the company's military security officer was smuggling in fuel and other items—such as cigarettes and alcohol—from China. A USB drive containing Chinese movies and information about the South Korean economy was discovered in the shipment. The officer's wife had reported the incident. The officer was due to face punishment, but he managed to avoid it by paying a bribe in RMB.

(Interview 14)

5.5.5. How to Transmit Outside Information to the KPA

A syringe is much more effective than an unwieldy stick. Once you make a small opening, you can pump in as much information as you want.
(Interview II)

Format & Devices: There was a repeated emphasis across multiple interviewees about sending in outside information in devices and formats that could be easily concealed or discarded.

SD cards or USB drives would be ideal...because mobile phones in North Korea now run on a state-produced operating system [OS], it would also be helpful to load content in a way that is technologically compatible with that OS. It is important that these devices are easily portable and can be quickly concealed in the event of an inspection.
(Interview 9)

I personally believe that it is crucial to send in outside information to soldiers, to open their minds. There are small earpieces that come in from China, and these are widely sold inside North Korea. Small chips [storage cards] can be plugged into these earpieces. These earpieces could be loaded with audio content about South Korea and other democracies...such devices would be easy to hide.
(Interview 12)

For now, the most effective means would be USB drives...they are portable, and they can be quickly destroyed or discarded when there is a risk of being discovered. This is not the case with paper leaflets, which are [relatively] large and not convenient to carry around.
(Interview 13)

Along the border areas with China, the best way would be to smuggle in storage devices such as USBs or SD cards by concealing them inside other items, such as clothes and consumer goods, that cross the border. These devices are very easy to hide, and they can be quickly disposed of—swallowed, for instance—when there is a danger of being discovered.
(Interview 14)

Several interviewees also stressed the importance of distributing leaflets to front-line areas along the DMZ. It is notable that both interviewees who are quoted below are relatively recent escapees.

Leaflets [would be most effective]. I spent a few months interacting with soldiers who served in these front-line areas and escaped North Korea across the DMZ. These soldiers had an extremely weak commitment to revolutionary ideology. Because of leaflets, they had an admiration for South Korea instead. These leaflets are extremely powerful.
(Served until 2012)

Paper leaflets are very important. 70% to 80% of the KPA is forward deployed along the 38th parallel. In the event of a war, it is these soldiers who would lead the attack. A soldier who has seen even one leaflet may not completely trust its contents, but they will begin to question, ever so slightly, what they know. This is critical. Then,

once they see first-hand the realities of South Korea, their thoughts will be transformed. Because soldiers are subjected only to ideology about Kim Jong-un in the military, these leaflets have a meaningful impact.
(Served until 2019)

One interviewee agreed about the importance of leaflets but added that the leaflet balloons could also address more immediate material needs.

Paper leaflets are, of course, important with respect to soldiers in the front-line areas. However, many of the soldiers who are currently serving in the military were born during the Arduous March. It may be more effective to send over snacks and food items than paper leaflets.
(Interview 7)

Content: Interviewees provided a range of suggestions about what kind of content would be most appealing to individuals in the KPA.

Because young soldiers have already received a great deal of ideological indoctrination, information that directly challenges this indoctrination can prompt a hostile reaction...it may even reinforce the regime's warning not to look at the leaflets. Instead, it is important to convey factual information about South Korea. They should be told about the endless opportunities that they can freely pursue in South Korea. It is this kind of message that will resonate with young soldiers.
(Interview 8)

Soldiers are most curious about what it is like to serve in the military in other countries — for example, how many years individuals must serve in the military for.
(Interview 5)

American or South Korean movies were most popular, in my experience. Comedy or action films are especially popular among North Korea's youth, including movies that portray organized crime in South Korea...Among American movies, almost everyone in our unit had seen Rambo.
(Interview 2)

One interviewee, however, stressed the need to think carefully about how outside content would be perceived by North Koreans.

Suppose that a North Korean watches a heartwarming TV drama from South Korea. They might imagine that South Korean society is kind and generous. Then, suppose that they watch a violent South Korean movie about organized crime the next day...this will only make them afraid. North Koreans have no way of knowing which of the two represents the truth—no way of understanding South Korea...is it possible to understand an entire society from watching one hour of TV?...unless content is carefully selected, dramas and movies will have nothing more than entertainment value. They will do nothing to meaningfully affect North Koreans' consciousness.
(Interview 11)

Structural Limitations & Opportunities: Interviewees were asked for their thoughts about whether it would be feasible to send in outside information into the KPA and, if so, what

the most effective means of doing so would be. While there were concerns about the structural limitations surrounding the military, several individuals believed that it would still be feasible. One particularly insightful response is quoted at length below.

It is possible. One of the basic requirements of the KPA is to strictly isolate itself from society...but because the KPA is severely lacking in its material conditions, it naturally forms many connections with the rest of North Korean society. There is, to be sure, still a barrier between the KPA and society. However, the KPA is unique in one regard. Soldiers are not supposed to have mobile phones according to regulations, but they secretly keep them anyway. They also have devices, such as MP5 players, with which they can view videos. The controls are not as strict as for the rest of society. Why is this so?

Outside of the military, kids can be caught with these devices in their pockets on the streets or at school, and they may face spot inspections from police officers who are passing by. The military, by contrast, still holds a privileged position in North Korea. When military personnel are off base, [other institutions and personnel] leave them alone. They do not and cannot interfere with the military.

Within the KPA, even officers at the battalion level are now in their 30s or younger. They are also curious about outside information; many are inclined to look the other way. Only those with relevant responsibilities, such as military security officers, will make some efforts to abide by their duties [in restricting access to outside information].

Suppose that a soldier was found to have watched a South Korean movie. If a similar incident had occurred in society, it would be promptly and harshly dealt with by the police as a criminal case. This would not be the case in the military. Military law is not so detailed as to stipulate specific criminal punishments for watching foreign movies. The military simply could not function if it had to deal with such minor issues...

There are restrictions within the KPA, but there are also advantages in terms of disseminating information. Once it enters the military, there are reasons to believe that it could spread quite rapidly.

(Interview II)

Furthermore, two individuals noted that it would be vital to consider the role of residents and communities that are located near military bases.

Officers frequently encounter civilians...it would be most reliable to spread outside information through these civilians.
(Interview 4)

It is important to widely disseminate outside information to residents who live near military bases. During my time in the KPA, I was able to access outside information at these households. It is not possible to consume foreign content while on base. If it is widely available in communities near military bases, it would provide opportunities for military personnel to go off base and access such content.

(Interview 2)

Reactions to Outside Information: The following account, recounted by an interviewee who served in the front-line areas along the DMZ, illustrates just how easy it is for cracks to appear in the North Korean regime's ideological edifice. If they are curious enough, soldiers can take

simple actions to assess the veracity of the material they studied during political indoctrination sessions. In addition, seemingly small or trivial pieces of information can prompt a soldier to start questioning what they have been taught.

Since I served in the front-line area, I was told to not look at or pick up leaflets by hand. We were to stamp on and tear them with our feet. We were also taught that disposable lighters and fountain pens [that came over in the leaflet balloons] were in fact bombs, and that socks—if worn—would cause our feet to rot.

I was fearful at first and did not dare touch the leaflet balloons when I found them in the mountains. Instead, I used long branches to dispose of these devices from a distance.

One day, I took the ramen [from a leaflet balloon] and fed it to a pig to see what would happen. The pig was perfectly fine. I did the same with the socks and found that nothing happened to the pig's feet. From that point on, I secretly wore the socks [that came over from South Korea].

Then, to check if the fountain pen was safe, I tied one end of a shoelace to the pen and pulled at it from a distance while lying face down in a footpath in the rice paddies. The pen did not explode. I kept the pen to myself and took it home.

(Interview 7)

Another response, given by an interviewee who served in the front-line area three decades later, also demonstrates how outside information can influence the mind of a KPA soldier.

A lot of leaflets came over to our unit, and I picked up and read several of them. Some criticized Kim Jong-un, and some compared the military capability of the ROK to that of North Korea. This content was in English too, so I wasn't really interested in those leaflets.

The last leaflet I picked up read [in Korean]: 'To the KPA DMZ border guards: the Republic of Korea, which you are looking at, has plentiful electricity and lush forests. It is also an economic powerhouse that ranks among the top ten in the world. Come over.'

When I read this, it was evident to me that this was not a lie...while on watch duty at night, I would look at the other side of the front line and saw that the ROK side was brightly lit. During the day, I could see that the mountains were covered with forests. By contrast, the North Korean side was completely dark and there was not a single tree...

People sometimes ask: why, then, did you not have the same thought before reading the leaflet? After all, the other side of the front line was always brightly lit and the forests were always there.

To this, I tell them: because we received heavy ideological indoctrination while we were on watch duty, we believed—to the point that it was subconscious—that everything about South Korea was a lie. When I read that text on that paper leaflet, it began to occur to me that what I was seeing in front of my eyes was not a lie.

(Interview 8)

Effect on Decision to Escape: Of the 16 interviewees, five indicated that exposure to outside information during their KPA service influenced their decision to escape North Korea. Three

of these interviewees served in front-line areas along the DMZ, and one served along the Sino-North Korean border. The remaining interviewee indicated that they had already been exposed to outside information while growing up in the border area near China, before entering the KPA.

Another six interviewees indicated that outside information, encountered before or after their time in the KPA, affected their decision to leave the country. This includes information received through contact with family members or relatives who had already resettled in South Korea.

Only five interviewees stated that outside information had no effect on their decision to escape. One interviewee was skeptical that anyone would embark on such a perilous journey after only watching a TV drama or a movie.

5.6. Conclusion

Over the past two decades, “unofficial” outside information and the technological devices that are used to consume this content have reached beyond the Sino-North Korean border and the DMZ and into inland areas of North Korea, including Pyongyang. The KPA is no exception to this changing information environment.

The interviews indicate that the KPA’s vertical command-and-control structure remains intact. A rigid, hierarchical system is used to transmit orders regarding tasks and training, as well as information regarding political indoctrination. There is some evidence that the KPA has adopted more up-to-date technology, such as video calls and an intranet, but it appears to be relying mostly on conventional means to communicate official information.

Despite the KPA’s efforts to restrict access to outside information, the interviews also indicate that North Korean soldiers have—in the past two decades—encountered a wide variety of foreign content using various technological devices. Those who can spend time outside of the barracks or off base appear to have more opportunities to encounter outside information, as well as officers, who frequently meet civilians. There are, to be sure, clear limitations in sending outside information into the KPA. However, it also appears that younger soldiers in today’s KPA—including some mid-ranking officers—have been irreversibly influenced by exposure to outside information. Even apparently insignificant pieces of information can have a powerful impact on the mind of a KPA soldier.

6. CONCLUSION: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Kim Jong-un wields total power over North Korea through a system of dynastic, autocratic rule based on a unique governing ideology and implemented through a single political faction. Systematically designed over decades to protect Kim family rule, suppress potential dissent, and block the influx of outside information, this system has enabled the regime to repeatedly muddle through crises. However, cracks in this system are becoming increasingly evident. Kim Jong-un has openly admitted to economic failures and has expressed concerns about an imminent food shortage. Rather than reforming, Kim is taking extreme measures to strengthen the Party apparatus, exerting it more deeply down and across the local levels in a three-pronged campaign to prevent outside information from entering North Korea, crack down on “corrupt” officials, and seal the borders. These policies could lead to deepening dissatisfaction and disillusionment among North Koreans, while contributing to further state decay.

Should the Kim regime collapse, the international community must be prepared to take measures to maintain stability. The potential employment—intentional or inadvertent—of the KPA ranks among the most serious risks that could destabilize the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia. It is unclear how regime collapse would impact North Korea’s armed forces. However, at least until the immediate power vacuum is filled, there would be no *Suryong* to wield authority over the Party, state, and military. Thus, the KPA would be devoid of the supreme command-and-control node from which orders flow downward. Lacking clear direction, KPA units—in a worst-case scenario—could default to pre-existing checklists and execute wartime tasks with no understanding of real-world events. This may result in the use of highly destructive weapons, including weapons of mass destruction.

The high stakes presented above put primacy on understanding the potential communication pathways capable of reaching KPA military forces in the event of a regime breakdown. Establishing lines of emergency communication can prevent the unnecessary employment of force and facilitate complex humanitarian operations. Information insertion points and pathways must be designed so that KPA forces, down to the soldier level, are aware of the real-world situation occurring inside and outside of North Korea and any humanitarian assistance that is on the way. To contribute to this effort, the authors conducted in-depth interviews with 16 former KPA soldiers to understand how official and unofficial forms of information are processed in the KPA: types and characteristics of information; technologies, systems and procedures used; access and control; and organizations involved in information dissemination.

Based on research conducted for this report and answers synthesized from the interviews, the authors offer the following findings and recommendations.

6.1. Findings

- The hypothesis that KPA units, lacking a supreme command-and-control node, may execute pre-assigned wartime tasks was partly supported through research conducted for this report and details from the interviews. However, there is insufficient evidence to state this with a high degree of confidence.

- Kim Jong-un has total control of North Korea's armed forces. The system is built to "coup-proof" the regime from the very institution that is capable of toppling the regime with its weapons, manpower, and organization. Military units are prevented from planning a coup due to rigid, vertical command-and-control; forbiddance of horizontal communication with other units; and the "triple reporting system," whereby military officers are flanked on each side by political and security officers who report on the military officer. Furthermore, access to outside information is blocked and soldiers have limited access to communication systems.
- These "coup-proofing" measures could produce the unintended outcome of leaving the KPA entirely uninformed during a crisis. If the Kim regime implodes, it is likely that command-and-control over KPA units would be disrupted. The KPA could be severed from the party-state apparatus, or it could receive conflicting orders as competing factions attempt to fill the power vacuum. In a worst-case scenario, KPA units could default to wartime mobilization.
- While the Kim regime is wary of outside information and takes extremes measures to prevent it from entering North Korea, it is most sensitive to South Korean cultural content.
 - One former KPA soldier explained that, since at least the 1980s, South Korean content has been considered the most serious ideological threat.
 - The recently enacted "anti-reactionary law" targets consumers and distributors of South Korean content with much stricter punishment than for those who consume or distribute U.S. or Japanese content. This new law appears to target even those who might be construed as writing, speaking, or singing like a South Korean.
- The availability of outside information, which has increased over the years, plays an important ongoing role in shaping and influencing KPA soldiers.
 - Interviewees claimed that outside information accessed either before, during, or after their time in the KPA influenced their decision to escape.
 - Recent KPA conscripts have likely already been exposed to foreign content prior to serving in the KPA. As explained in the interviews, one of first things conscripts must now complete upon entering basic training is a "voluntary" list of "impure" video content they have seen. They are told that a full confession will ensure past transgressions are forgiven but are warned that additional future violations will be punished severely.
 - Outside information is now widely diffused throughout North Korea. Over the past two decades, outside information and the technological devices used to consume this content have reached beyond the Sino-North Korean border and the DMZ and into inland areas of North Korea, including Pyongyang.
 - Corruption in the KPA, close to non-existent from the 1980s through the very early 2000s, has been widespread in the KPA since at least the mid-2000s. Bribes and other forms of corruption have, in some cases, allowed access to outside information to go unpunished, facilitating further proliferation in varying degrees.

- Despite trends indicating the proliferation of outside information getting into North Korea, getting information directly into the KPA continues to face major hurdles.
 - Structural limitations exist. Interviewees indicated that the KPA's vertical command-and-control remains structurally strong.
 - » Little information is shared horizontally.
 - » A rigid, hierarchical system transmits orders downward relating to tasks, training, and political indoctrination. Conventional means are used to transmit information down and flow information upward.
 - » Printed materials and classified documents are hand-delivered by designated messengers, while time-sensitive communications are transmitted via Morse code or by telephone, to which ordinary KPA soldiers do not have access. Only select individuals in leadership positions have access to communications with higher units.
 - » Intranet communications are becoming adopted, but slowly, and not with widespread application. Information gleaned from the interviews suggests that while the KPA likely does not have the budgetary resources to fully modernize its information systems, adhering to older, conventional means may work well as an asymmetric means to keep information secure in the KPA.
 - » The KPA also restricts what materials can be accessed by rank.
 - Political ideological training still consumes an inordinate amount of time in the life of a KPA soldier and has been intensified in recent years.
 - » For a KPA soldier that serves up to ten years, as many as 10,000 hours of political indoctrination are received. Accounting for this are presumably the daily two-hour political indoctrination sessions and "political life" sessions. In addition to training, most of a KPA soldier's time in the military is spent participating in political indoctrination sessions.
 - » Most interviewees indicated that political indoctrination content had not changed much over the years, except for short periods of intensification prior to or surrounding training cycles or major events. However, recent escapees indicated that the political indoctrination of soldiers has been intensified in recent years due to conscripts having greater exposure to South Korean and other foreign content prior to entering the KPA.
 - » Political indoctrination of KPA soldiers includes explicit warnings and instructions about what to do if outside information is discovered. A consistent theme is that leaflets are covered with deadly poison, and that soldiers should immediately report any such items to the appropriate authorities.

- KPA soldiers are very careful when discussing their experiences with outside information.
 - » Most interviewees indicated that soldiers would be extremely cautious about sharing outside information with others within the unit due to strict internal mechanisms of monitoring and control. In addition to political guidance officers and military security officers assigned to their units, there are informants down to the squad level in KPA military units.
 - » Former KPA soldiers interviewed mostly agreed that they would receive harsh punishment if caught with outside material.
- KPA ground forces soldiers assigned to a base have few opportunities to access outside information.
 - » Higher ranking officers or NCOs who can live or travel off base are in a much better position to access outside information.
- While limitations exist, it is still possible to get information into the KPA.
 - While KPA ground forces soldiers lack opportunities to access outside information on base, this was not the case for air and naval forces. KPA soldiers with experience in the air force and naval forces appeared to have easier access.
 - For KPA officers and senior NCOs with off-base access, the role of residents and communities that are located near military bases becomes a viable consideration.
 - One interviewee candidly explained that while soldiers are not supposed to have mobile phones according to regulations, they secretly find ways to keep them anyway, along with other devices—such as MP5 players—with which they can view videos. In some instances, soldiers are subject to less scrutiny than civilians. Soldiers do not fall under the same jurisdiction of regime surveillance as ordinary civilians, creating potential opportunities to access outside information.
 - The Sino-North Korean border remains a key entry point not only for foreign content, but also the electronic devices that are used to consume this content.
 - » Border guards are an essential part of smuggling operations. According to the interviews, they may receive up to 30% of the profits from smuggling.
 - In addition to the Sino-North Korean border, information arrives via the West Sea, in bottles scooped up and distributed onward by North Korean fishermen.
 - Due to the risks involved, the markets are no longer the primary means to obtain outside information on a personal basis.
 - » Recent escapees explained that it is generally too risky to seek out foreign content at the market. Content is smuggled into the country and then passed to trusted individuals for further distribution.

- Duties, tasks, and military occupation have a large influence on whether a KPA soldier can gain access to outside information.
 - » Tasks or occupations that carry a degree of autonomy, allowing the soldier to perform alone, such as drivers who end up with “free time” on their hands, create opportunities to access outside information.
 - » Soldiers involved with logistics, supplies, and the distribution of goods have more opportunities.
 - » It is common for KPA soldiers to undertake tasks that would ordinarily fall outside of military training and assigned tasks. These include various economic activities and construction-related assignments.
 - » Higher-ranking individuals tend to have more autonomy and free time, including off-base access, and thus have more opportunities to access outside information.
- Effective Messaging
 - Interviewees provided useful insight about the types of outside information and the types of content that would be most effective.
 - » Because KPA soldiers receive a tremendous amount of ideological indoctrination, outside information that directly challenges this indoctrination could inadvertently prompt a hostile or defensive reaction, possibly reinforcing the regime’s warning about outside information. It is therefore important to convey factual information about South Korea—including the endless opportunities that they can freely pursue if they come to the South—that will resonate with young KPA soldiers.
 - Some still consider leaflets to be the most effective form of outside information.

6.2. Recommendations

- I. The Biden administration should lead efforts to rebuild an international coalition at the UN to promote human rights in North Korea. The first step would be to appoint a Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues at the State Department. Part of the Special Envoy’s portfolio is to coordinate and support international efforts to promote freedoms in North Korea, including the rights to freedom of expression and information. The Special Envoy also has the duty to review strategies to improve the protection of human rights in North Korea. As it relates to the findings in this report, the Special Envoy could consult with NGOs and provide coordination across the U.S. government to formulate policies to bypass the North Korean regime’s monopoly on information. These policies will be especially important in the event of a regime breakdown. It is vital that critical information promptly reaches KPA forces under such circumstances, so that they are aware of the

real-world situation occurring inside and outside of North Korea and forthcoming humanitarian assistance.

2. The government of the Republic of Korea should consider promptly rescinding the “anti-leaflet law” that went into effect on March 30, 2021. The bill was introduced in the National Assembly in June 2020 after Kim Jong-un’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, complained about leaflet balloons being sent into North Korea and threatened South Korea. The irony of this law should not be lost on anyone. The political leaders of a free and democratic Republic of Korea—leaders who once fought their own government for freedoms of speech and assembly—are now repressing the freedoms of groups desiring to assemble and express their own forms of free speech. These actions strengthen the Kim regime’s efforts to perpetuate control over the North Korean people. Even more tragic is the fact that many of those being repressed in South Korea include former North Koreans who risked their lives to escape the Kim regime.
3. Humanitarian campaigns and influence operations should carefully consider means to deliver messaging. Appropriately designed leaflets should target those who are forward deployed in areas north of the 38th parallel. Leaflet balloons, passé though they may seem, still appear to be a highly effective means of delivering messages, since they do not require additional access to devices or other forms of communications technology. Since 70% to 80% of the KPA is forward deployed along the 38th parallel, and in the event of a war, it is these soldiers who would lead an attack, it is vital that this area be prioritized for delivery of appropriately designed leaflets.
4. The design of such leaflets should be carefully considered. While dramas, songs, and movies hold entertainment value, leaflets should be designed to avoid arousing resentment or defensiveness. Outside, foreign information that is critical of or mocks the Kim regime can backfire. Anecdotally, for instance, many North Korean escapees found little humor in *The Interview*. Instead, factual, humanitarian information about democracy and human rights, along with other types of helpful information would resonate most with KPA soldiers.
5. Policy planners should seek to understand and examine the use of additional pathways to insert information. The more lenient pathways to air force and naval units are viable considerations. Another consideration involves those residents living near military bases as nodes for information dissemination. The role of fishermen along the West Sea should also be explored.
6. Additional research and interviews should be considered with regards to former high-ranking KPA officers with experience commanding units at the battalion or higher levels, as well as high-ranking Party cadres. This will help generate a more comprehensive picture of information flows within the KPA and yield a greater understanding of how KPA units may behave in the event of a crisis that threatens the survival of the Kim regime.

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