

# **The Past, Present and Future of Leadership Analysis: Xi, Kim and Putin**

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*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations, the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center and the United States Department of State.*

## **Abstract**

The origins of leadership analysis and political psychology profiling date to World War II and the Cold War, when Drs. Walter Langer and Jerrold Post published classified leadership profiles of various world leaders for senior U.S. policymakers. Such portraits provided a psychological understanding of a given leader's traits and political behavior and emphasized how such understanding might prove useful in diplomatic negotiations, stressing the close relationship between charismatic, narcissistic leaders and their impassioned followers. More than ever, national security professionals and policymakers must understand the intentions of adversaries, especially during military confrontations, hybrid warfare, diplomatic negotiations, political/economic conflicts and national security crises. Leadership analysis can thereby be expected remain a viable and strategically useful tool of 21<sup>st</sup>-century intelligence analysis.

## **Introduction**

Imagine the following scenario. The year is 2023. Leaders of the G-20 are attending a summit meeting which includes the new leader of China (following the end of President Xi's nominal 10-year term), about whom little is known. Or it is 2025, and America's president is meeting the newest leader of Russia at the G-20 summit, a little-known politician outside of Russia. Or it is 2021, and the Supreme Leader of Iran, who has been ailing for several years with prostate

cancer, becomes bed-ridden and goes into hospice care. The newly appointed Supreme Leader is a surprise choice, even in Iran. In each of these cases, it is likely that the new leaders have rarely given a public interview or traveled outside of their respective countries, although they may have previously served in high-level political and party leadership roles. How might a given foreign leader approach such a discussion or negotiation? What sort of information would he or she wish to know? What is his or her counterpart like as a person or as a leader? Does he or she have any health issues? What motivates him or her? What makes him or her tick? Is he or she a reliable negotiating partner? These are key questions, which possess significant relevance with respect to international relations, national security, trade and geopolitical stability. In such a scenario, leaders seek *any* information which would give them and their nation an edge or advantage in its national security strategy vis-à-vis an adversary nation or competitor. Leadership analysis of foreign leaders has, outside of classified government circles, remained an obscure, niche specialty of intelligence analysis. But the ascendance of “strongmen” leaders such as Russia’s Putin, China’s Xi, India’s Modi, America’s Trump, the Philippines’ Duterte, Indonesia’s Jokowi, Hungary’s Orban, Syria’s Assad and Turkey’s Erdogan has given significant impetus to this discipline. In the realm of national security and international relations, leadership analysis and political psychology has its place. This paper will provide a historical background of how this discipline developed from its roots in World War II, expanding upon the author’s earlier published leadership analyses of North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, Russia’s Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi Jinping, concluding with a summary of future trends.

## Background

In early 1943, General William Donovan, Director of the Office of Strategic Services, asked his friend and colleague Dr. Walter Langer, a psychoanalyst affiliated with Harvard University, to develop a psychological profile of Adolf Hitler.<sup>1</sup> General Donovan asked the following of Dr. Langer: “What we need . . . is a realistic appraisal of the German situation. If Hitler is running the show, what kind of a person is he? What are his ambitions? How does he appear to the German people? What is he like with his associates? What is his background? And most of all, we want to know as much as possible about his psychological make-up – the things that make him tick. In addition, we ought to know what he might do if things begin to go against him.” General Donovan further directed Dr. Langer to “get it done as soon as possible, keep it brief, and make it readable to the layman.” Langer assembled a small team, which interviewed defectors and other associates who had known, interacted or worked with Hitler. They reviewed every speech Hitler had given as well as Hitler’s writings. They digested biographies and articles written about Hitler, viewed films of his speeches and collected any material regarding his health. Langer sought to understand Hitler’s self-image, his public image and what his close associates thought of him. Langer’s profile did not shy from prediction: he wrote that Hitler would commit suicide “as the most plausible outcome” towards the end of the war.

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<sup>1</sup> For comprehensive recent reviews of this field, see Kenneth B. Dekleva, “Leadership Analysis and Political Psychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* Vol 46, No. 3, 2018, pp. 359-363, and Stephen Benedict Dyson and Charles A. Duelfer, “Assessing How the US Intelligence Community Analyzes Foreign Leaders,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, No. 0, 2020, pp. 1-29. Also, see Kenneth Dekleva, “Can we do business with Kim Jong Un? Leadership analysis might give clues,” *The Hill*, August 18, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/457537-can-we-do-business-with-kim-jong-un-leadership-analysis-might-give-clues>, and Kenneth Dekleva, “Governance matters: The West could learn from leaders in Africa and Asia,” *The Hill*, November 8, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/469023-governance-matters-the-west-could-learn-from-leaders-in-africa-and-asia>. See also Stephen Benedict Dyson, ‘Origins of the Psychological Profiling of Political Leaders: The US Office of Strategic Services and Adolf Hitler,’ *Intelligence and National Security* Vol 29, No. 5, 2014, pp. 654-674; Walter Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

Langer's work exerted a powerful intellectual influence, both in the fields of leadership analysis and political psychology as later developed by Dr. Jerrold Post, and criminal personality profiling as pioneered by Dr. James Brussel.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Dr. Langer's profile, General Donovan also requested a separate psychological profile on Hitler from Dr. Henry Murray, a psychologist who also taught at Harvard University. Murray's work had a huge impact on the development of leadership profiling and selection of personnel in elite organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and U.S. Army Special Forces.<sup>3</sup>

In 1965, Post joined the CIA, where he founded a unit for the analysis of the psychology of world leaders. Over the next several decades, Post followed Langer's model, leading a team of psychiatrists, internists, psychologists, anthropologists, historians and intelligence analysts, who developed classified leadership profiles of numerous world leaders for the US intelligence community and senior policymakers.<sup>4</sup> A high point for Post involved the now declassified "Camp David Profiles," in which individual psychological assessments of Israel's Menachem Begin and Egypt's Anwar Sadat helped U.S. President Jimmy Carter achieve a better psychological understanding of their negotiating tactics, which paved the way for the successful 1979 Camp David peace accords.<sup>5</sup> In 1986, Post retired from the CIA and continued his career at George Washington University, where he and his collaborators (including this author) published numerous leadership profiles.<sup>6</sup> Post's methodology, like that of Langer, entailed a close

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Cannell, *Incendiary: The Psychiatrist, The Mad Bomber, and Invention of Criminal Profiling* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Murray, Analysis of the Personality of Adolf Hitler. Washington DC, OSS Report, October 1943.

<sup>4</sup> See this definitive work by Jerrold M. Post (ed.), *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders With Profiles of Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton* (Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Press, 2003)

<sup>5</sup> Jerrold M. Post, "Personality Profiles in Support of the Camp David Summit," *CIA Studies in Intelligence* No. 23, 1979, pp. 1-5

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth B. Dekleva and Jerrold M. Post, "Genocide in Bosnia: the case of Dr. Radovan Karadzic," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1997, pp. 485-496; Kenneth B. Dekleva and Jerrold M. Post, "Slobodan Milosevic: Why the Crisis Could Last," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 29, 1999; Jerrold M. Post, "Kim Jong-il of North Korea: In the Shadow of his Father," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic*

examination of the leader's childhood, young adulthood, transition to midlife, relationships, speeches, collateral data and writings. Like Langer, Post also did not shy from predictions. But the greater emphases in such portraits involved a psychological understanding of a given leader's traits and political behavior and how such understanding might prove useful in diplomatic negotiations.<sup>7</sup> Like Langer before him, Post emphasized the close relationship, almost a lock-and-key fit, between charismatic, narcissistic leaders and their impassioned followers.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2016, this author has published leadership analyses and political psychology profiles of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and China's President Xi Jinping.<sup>9</sup> While owing much to the traditions established by Drs. Langer and Post, this work has decreased the emphasis upon psychopathology in favor of sharper focus on traits and behaviors that allow a given leader to accomplish his tactical and strategic political and economic goals. Such an approach looks more at a given leader's strengths and leadership outcomes. One asks,

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*Studies* No. 5, 2008, pp. 191-210; Jerrold M. Post and Ruthie Pertsis, "Bashar al-Assad is every bit his father's son," *Foreign Policy*, December 20, 2011; Jerrold M. Post, "Saddam Hussein of Iraq: A Political Psychology Profile," *Political Psychology* Vol 12, No. 2, 1991, pp. 279-289; Jerrold M. Post, 'Qaddafi Under Siege,'" *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2011; Jerrold M. Post, 'El Fenomeno Chavez: Hugo Chavez of Venezuela,' *The Counterproliferation papers: Future Warfare Series* No. 39, 2007), pp.1-38

<sup>7</sup> Jerrold M. Post (ed.), *The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders With Profiles of Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton* (Ann Arbor: Univ of Michigan Press, 2003)

<sup>8</sup> For writings about the role of narcissism and leadership, see Jerrold M. Post, *Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory* (New York: Cambridge Univ Press, 2015). Also, see Jerrold M. Post, 'Narcissism and the charismatic leader-follower relationship,' *Pol Psychology* No. 7, 1986, pp. 675-678, and 'Current Concepts of the narcissistic personality: implications for politics,'" *Pol Psychology* No. 14, 1993, pp. 99-121

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'Path Not Preordained: A Profile of China's Xi Jinping,' *The Cipher Brief*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/strategic-view/path-not-preordained-profile-chinas-xi-jinping>; Mercy A. Kuo, 'On the Couch in Beidaihe: The Political Psychology of China's President Xi Jinping: Insights from Dr. Kenneth Dekleva,' August 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/on-the-couch-in-beidaihe-the-political-psychology-of-chinas-president-xi-jinping>; Kenneth Dekleva, 'The Many Faces of Vladimir Putin: A Political Psychology Profile,' *The Cipher Brief*, January 22, 2017, [https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column\\_article/the-many-faces-of-vladimir-putin-a-political-psychology-profile](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-many-faces-of-vladimir-putin-a-political-psychology-profile); Kenneth Dekleva, 'Putin's Mad Soft Power Skills,' *The Cipher Brief*, November 15, 2018, [https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column\\_article/putins-mad-soft-power-skills](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/putins-mad-soft-power-skills); Mercy A. Kuo, 'Kim Jong-un's Political Psychology Profile: Insights from Ken Dekleva,' *The Diplomat*, October 17, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/kim-jong-uns-political-psychology-profile>; Mercy A. Kuo, 'The Psychology of North Korea's Kim Jong-un: The Measure of a Man,' March 14, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-psychology-of-north-koreas-kim-jong-un-the-measure-of-a-man>; Kenneth Dekleva, 'The Many Faces of Chairman Kim Jong Un,' *38 North*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/01/kdekleva013020>

how did the leader acquire power and use it successfully? Whom does the leader trust? How does the leader make critical decisions? What are their goals and vision? What kinds of outcomes has the leader brought about? What is the leader like as a negotiating partner? Is he a rational leader? Is he disruptive? The current kit of analytical tools has expanded beyond those that Langer, Post and others established decades ago. Analyses of a leader's social media posts (e.g., tweets), speeches, writings and comments in private and public settings are now standard.

Additionally, medical intelligence on a leader's health—a closely guarded state secret in most countries—is an important part of modern profiles. Medical predictions can be difficult as most epidemiological studies on long-term health rely solely on Western, white male subjects.<sup>10</sup> The same holds true of much psychological testing, including intelligence quotient testing, which may also be subject to a variety of biases, including unconscious bias and implicit bias.<sup>11</sup> The advent of novel technologies, gait analysis, natural language processing and video software tools may provide additional data. These aspects become important since most leaders of today's G-20 are in their sixties or seventies. Even though these leaders have access to state-of-the-art medical care, Post and Robins have argued that being a national leader often predisposes one to getting less-qualified medical care. The psychological dynamics of treating such powerful individuals are complex and the leader's physician(s) may have little meaningful influence on a given leader's health habits.<sup>12</sup> Medical professionals, especially psychiatrists, are uniquely versed in

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<sup>10</sup> See Jonathan D. Clemente, 'In sickness and in health,' *Bull Atomic Sci No.* 63, 2007, pp. 38–44, 2007; Alice M. Girardi et al., 'Impact of coronary heart disease on world leaders,' *Ann Int Med No.* 134, 2001, pp. 287–90; Leslie R. Pyenson, Laurence A. Cove, and Francis X. Brickfield, 'Patterns of death in world leaders,' *Mil Med No.* 163, 1998), pp. 797–800; Francis X. Brickfield and Leslie R. Pyenson, 'Impact of stroke on world leaders,' *Mil Med No.* 166, 2001, pp. 231–2

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the role of biases in analytic thinking, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Thinking Slow* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2011)

<sup>12</sup> For a historic perspective, see Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *When Illness Strikes the Leader: The Dilemma of the Captive King* (New Haven: Yale Univ Press, 1993)

understanding neuropsychiatric illness and behavior and the psychological overlay of medical and surgical illness. For example, in 2009, former President Clinton's personal physician accompanied him to North Korea, where he was included in the meetings with Kim Jong-il. This allowed for closer observation of Kim's purported residual neurologic deficits after his stroke in 2008.<sup>13</sup> Medical leadership analysis also requires understanding of a given leader's protective health factors, including genetics, psychological resilience, health habits, hobbies and relationship with intimates, family, friends and colleagues.

In the absence of overt mental illness (and it should be stressed that most leaders profiled do *not* have mental illness), current methodology emphasizes the description of a leader's psychological traits, rather than conditions defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).<sup>14</sup> Most potential psychiatric diagnoses of world leaders lack validity, not only due to the absence of a face-to-face evaluation—the problem explicitly addressed in the Goldwater Rule—but also because the leader likely evidences no clinical distress or dysfunction as a result of his purported symptoms and signs.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the role of classified data in leadership analysis warrants careful thought and commentary beyond intelligence agencies' concern regarding exposure of sources and methods, but attention to potential biases, including hearsay, personal motivations of sources, vetting of such sources and risks of embellishment or minimization, requires the same cautions as exercised in the discipline of intelligence analysis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Erlanger, 'Doctor confirms Kim Jong Il Stroke,' New York Times, December 11, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/12/world/asia/12kim.html>; Chosun Ilbo/National Politics, 'Bill Clinton's doctor "took close look at Kim Jong-Il,' ChoSunIlBo, September 17, 2009, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/09/17/2009091700392.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/09/17/2009091700392.html)

<sup>14</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition: DSM-5*. (APA Press, Washington DC, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Paul S. Appelbaum, 'Reflections on the Goldwater Rule,' J Am Acad Psychiatry Law Vol 45, No. 2, 2017, pp. 228-232

<sup>16</sup> Regarding intelligence analysis, see Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 2011); Wilhelm Agrell and Gregory F. Treverton. *National Intelligence and*

Finally, the work of Post (and others using similar methodology) has not been subjected to rigorous scientific outcome measures.<sup>17</sup> In addition, senior leaders and policymakers, as well as media personalities and corporate executives, may have greater personal access to a given leader during summits, negotiations and conferences, offering them raw data unmatched by the data presented in leadership profiles.<sup>18</sup> Leadership analysts working in this field should be able to anticipate and manage such methodological concerns.<sup>19</sup>

A more complex concern involves the degree of influence (and how this in turn relates to underlying methodology) of such leadership profiles, which is impossible to measure and to separate from methodology *per se*. The gold standard for influence within the U.S. government would be for a profile, or components thereof, to be included in the Presidential Daily Brief (PDB). But the PDB is a heavily edited and carefully revised living document, and elements of a given profile may be enhanced, diluted or even taken out of context. The question of degree of influence is heightened when customers (including senior leaders) in the diplomatic, intelligence and policy communities express a distrust of such analyses. These individuals either rely on their own (or others') instincts and political judgments, or they have an inherent distrust of psychiatric and psychological approaches to understanding political and leadership behavior. Additionally, the subject leader's national security team and intelligence services will scrutinize such published

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*Science: Beyond the Great Divide in Analysis and Policy* (New York: Oxford Univ Press, 2015); Richards J. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington DC: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2007)

<sup>17</sup> See Thomas Omestad, 'Psychology and the CIA: leaders on the couch,' *Foreign Policy* No. 95, 1994), pp. 104-122

<sup>18</sup> See Todd Hall and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'The Personal Touch: Leaders' Impressions, Costly Signaling, and Assessments of Sincerity in International Affairs,' *International Studies Quarterly* No 56, 2012, pp. 560-573, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries,' *International Security* 38, No. 1, 2013), pp. 7-51

<sup>19</sup> Benedict Carey, 'Teasing Out Policy Insight From a Character Profile,' March 28, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/science/29psych.html>

profiles. A controversial profile could motivate these groups to retaliate through hacking, encouraging online attacks by internet trolls or other forms of harassment.

Academic institutions and think tanks may be sensitive to the media image created by work involving the intelligence community. In addition, experience and familiarity with the national security strategy can assist in understanding the analytic process and how such information is developed, disseminated and used by senior policymakers. Lastly, leadership analysis remains critical in our understanding and use of intelligence as a tool of strategy within a whole of government approach. This has become even more salient and critical in 21<sup>st</sup>-century warfare, which often involves asymmetric, hybrid and/or “gray zone” actions and conflicts.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of hybrid, gray zone warfare, see Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* (New York: William Morrow, 2019)

## **Xi Jinping: The Chinese Dream of The Great Rejuvenation**

In 2000, Xi Jinping, the then relatively unknown (outside of China) governor of Fujian, gave a rare interview to a Chinese newspaper. In this interview, Xi spoke of his philosophy of good governance, his traumatic childhood experiences, his closeness to the people and his legacy as a son of Xi Zhongxun, one of China's first-generation Communist leaders and a close associate of Mao since the Long March of the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

After his father was jailed during the Cultural Revolution, Xi Jinping—only 14 at the time—was expelled from high school in Beijing and then arrested by the Red Guards, who accused him of political crimes. He was threatened with execution—“We can execute you a hundred times”—and Xi later wrote, “To my mind there was no difference between being executed a hundred times or once, so why be afraid of a hundred times?” Spared, he was instead “sent down” to the countryside in Shaanxi where he spent seven lonely years living among the peasantry, digging latrines and performing hard manual labor.

In 2012, after being elected China's president by the National People's Congress, Xi spoke of the Chinese Dream of rejuvenation as “the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times.”<sup>2</sup> Xi stated that this dream would occur by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, and would allow for the building of a prosperous, socialist, harmonious and democratic society. He also stated, “In the future, the Chinese nation will forge ahead like a gigantic ship breaking through strong winds and heavy waves.” His soaring rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup> See Carsten Boyer Thogersen and Susanne Posborg, ‘An Interview from 2000 with China's Vice President Xi Jinping,’ Politiken, October 28, 2012, <http://nias.asia/news/interview-2000-china%E2%80%99s-vice-president-xi-jinping-translated-western-language-first-time-0>

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, ‘Path Not Preordained: A Profile of Xi Jinping,’ The Cipher Brief, September 7, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/strategic-view/path-not-preordained-profile-chinas-xi-jinping>; Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (New York: CN Times Books, 2015)

is in contrast to his more restrained language from the 2000 interview, in which he stated, “Do not try to do the impossible, do not strive for the unobtainable, do not rest on the transient, do not do what cannot be repeated.” Central to Xi’s vision is the primacy of the CCP. However, it also links the dream to 5,000 years of Chinese history and to the national aspirations of the Chinese people.

In January 2017, Xi delivered the opening plenary speech at the Davos World Economic Forum, the first time that a Chinese leader had done so. He spoke of the need for better global development, innovation-driven growth, fair and equitable global governance, “win-win” cooperation and the value of multilateral organizations and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Xi presented China (and himself) as a leader—*not* as a “disruptor”—among nations in projection of economic power and values. In his mind, this is China’s proper place within the international community. And recently, in highlighting China’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi has emphasized China’s role as a responsible partner in collaborating with international organizations (e.g., WHO) to combat the pandemic’s deadly scourge.

These vignettes reveal different sides of China’s leader, who many consider the most powerful Chinese leader since Mao. Although Xi is no stranger to U.S. policymakers, he remains—even after eight years in power—an opaque and seemingly inscrutable leader. In part due to such misunderstanding, tensions between China and the United States have escalated. Understanding China’s political actions requires a careful analysis of Xi’s marriage of narratives with respect to his personal story of post-traumatic growth and resilience, his articulation of the Chinese Dream and other competing collective ideologies involving Maoism, nationalism and Confucianism. Xi’s use of such different ideologies and philosophies is deliberate, precise and subtle. Yet in

doing so, he must realize that solely appealing to the CCP's history and legitimacy lacks the collective appeal necessary to shape the future of China.

Many published profiles of Xi—by experts such as Evan Osnos, Kurt Campbell and Robert Blackwill, Randal Phillips, Kerry Brown and Willy Lam—describe him as “China’s CEO,” a godfather-like figure, “redder than red” or as China’s most powerful leader since Mao.<sup>3</sup> But other analyses, including a 2009 U.S. Embassy Beijing cable leaked to the media, have tended to see Xi as more Machiavellian, less intelligent (“of only average intelligence”) and driven largely by self-interest and ambition.<sup>4</sup> Perceptions of Xi can easily suffer from bias, forgetting that his path to power was difficult, uncertain and not at all preordained. He was barely elected to the Central Committee in the late 1990s and to the Politburo in the early 2000s.

A reading of Xi’s writings, interviews and speeches offers analysts a treasure trove of material, which can reveal Xi’s remarkable resilience, leadership qualities, inner strength and psychological sensibility.<sup>5</sup> In 2000, Xi wrote about his childhood experiences in Shaanxi:

I grew up in the seven years I was in Shaanxi. I learned two important things. First, I had the opportunity to understand what real life looks like, what is right and wrong, and who ordinary people are. These were experiences for life. Second, I had my self-confidence built up. As they say: the knife is sharpened on a stone, people are strengthened in adversity. Seven years of hard life in the countryside developed me a lot. When later in life I have encountered challenges, I have thought about the village, and that then I could do something in spite of hardships.

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<sup>3</sup> For biographical accounts of Xi, see Evan Osnos, ‘Born Red: How Xi Jinping, an unremarkable provincial administrator, became China’s most authoritarian leader since Mao,’ *The New Yorker*, April 6, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/born-red>; Robert Blackwill and Kurt Campbell, *Xi Jinping on the Global Stage: Chinese Foreign Policy Under a Powerful But Exposed Leader* (Washington DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2016); Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping: renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford Univ Press, 2018); Kerry Brown, *CEO, China: The Rise of Xi Jinping* (London: IB Tauris, 2016); Francois Bougon, *Inside the Mind of Xi Jinping* (London: Hurst, 2018); Mercy A. Kuo and Angelica O. Tang, ‘China’s Leadership Fault Lines: Progress vs. Power: Insights from Randal L. Phillips,’ *The Diplomat*, February 15, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/chinas-leadership-fault-lines-progress-vs-power>

<sup>4</sup> See Wikileaks cable 09BEIJING3128\_a, “Portrait of Vice President Xi Jinping: Ambitious Survivor of the Cultural Revolution,” November 16, 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING3128\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING3128_a.html)

<sup>5</sup> Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014)

When later I have come across problems, I have never experienced them as big as then. Every man is to find his own strength.

These psychological qualities define Xi and his singular role in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese political life.

Xi's keen sense of organization, discipline and deft management of domestic policy has also played a significant role in China's ongoing political and economic restoration. Xi is a conservative pragmatist, cautious to a fault, who described his economic philosophy in a 2000 interview as, "To light a small fire to warm up the water, keep the fire burning and now and again pour some more cold water in, so that the kettle did not boil over."

Xi's powerful sense of renewal of China's pride and place in the world—and the strong social, emotional and psychological appeal that this has for the Chinese people—accounts for Xi's high political popularity ratings. But he has also taken a political risk by appealing to primitive, powerful nationalist passions embedded in the Chinese Dream. As a leader, Xi exudes discipline, as exemplified by his unwavering support of Wang Qishan's anti-corruption investigations. This enterprise has removed over 200,000 party leaders (including powerful Politburo members such as Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang). Through these and other efforts, Xi has concentrated his power and cemented his control of the various Leading Groups, the National Security Commission and the Central Military Commission.

Xi's close management of domestic policy has dealt with significant challenges such as economic reform, social control and Party discipline. Regarding the latter, Xi has shown harsh authoritarian traits in his absolute emphasis on the primacy of the CCP, control of the internet and his support of crackdowns on human rights and civil discourse (including in Xinjiang and

Hong Kong).<sup>6</sup> Notably, “Xi Jinping Thought” was enshrined in the CCP’s constitution during the 19th National Party Congress in 2017, and term limits were recently abolished, allowing Xi to stay in power beyond his 10-year term. Xi personally experienced the chaos and trauma of the Cultural Revolution. And similar to all Chinese leaders, the tragic history of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Taiping Rebellion (in which millions of Chinese perished) is seared into his psyche.<sup>7</sup>

Xi has never lived or studied abroad (although his daughter is a graduate of Harvard University), but he has travelled extensively, displaying his charm, grace and excellent diplomatic abilities. Compared to his predecessor Hu Jintao, who was seen as dull and pedantic, Xi’s charisma was a refreshing change. Along with his equally famous wife, Peng Liyuan (a renowned singer and retired People’s Liberation Army general), Xi has attempted to project China’s welcome appeal. So far in his tenure, Xi has skillfully managed relationships globally through a personal, gracious and dignified style. Xi’s deft handling of political relationships with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and North Korea’s Chairman Kim Jong-un, since 2018, also come to mind.

Xi’s background as a “princeling”—the children of powerful Communist leaders who participated in the revolution—has certainly impacted his entire personal professional life. But overreliance on such a label loses sight of Xi’s adaptability regarding domestic and foreign policy challenges. It also confuses status with ability and psychological resilience. Part of Xi’s strength comes from an emphasis on filial piety, as well as closeness to the land (“the yellow earth”) and its people. Xi has written, “Ordinary people are like our father and our mother. As

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<sup>6</sup> For analysis of China’s strategy, see Jonathan D. T. Ward, *China’s Vision of Victory* (New York: Atlas Publishing and Media, 2019); also, Alice Lyman Miller, ‘Xi Jinping and the Evolution of Chinese Leadership Politics,’ in Thomas Fingar and Jean C. Oi (eds), *Fateful Decisions: Choices That Will Shape China’s Future* (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> For a history of the Taiping rebellion, see Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: WW Norton, 1996)

you love your mother and father, you should love the people, be of use, and create a good life for everybody.”

Such character traits, born of both individual and collective adversity, are both remarkable and appealing to Chinese citizens. Such a portrait presents Xi—who has been referred to as “smiling on the outside and hard on the inside”—as a man of the people and of the soil. As Xi has stated, “When you are close to the grass roots and close to the people, no storms from any corner of the world can blow you down or make you surrender.” This reflects Xi’s truest and greatest strength as a political leader and a concatenation of psychological character traits rare among 21<sup>st</sup>-century leaders.

Although U.S. President Donald Trump had played gracious host to Xi at Mar-a-Lago in April 2017, their relationship masked multiple areas of tension between China and the United States. Henry Kissinger and Graham Allison have written extensively about the “Thucydides Trap,” in which a rising power such as China collides and enters into conflict with an existing power such as the United States.<sup>8</sup> Chinese media sources have subsequently lambasted Trump as having “a personality amplified by bloated self-regard and the lifetime habits of rapaciousness. The result is a person possessed of a prideful quasi-imperial mindset that is coupled to heinous vulgarity... a kind of shyster who boastfully promotes themselves while sullyng everything in the guise of loyalty. Dealing with new problems within the framework of an out-of-touch mindset while nonetheless exuding supreme confidence, he inevitably makes the mistakes of the

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding the Thucydides Trap, see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), and Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011)

willful.”<sup>9</sup> The publication of such pejorative language regarding Trump in the tightly controlled Chinese media is striking and without precedent.

Xi has always shown adaptability in coping with personal and political challenges. Aside from governance issues—including economic reform, COVID-19 and corruption—his most profound challenge lies in managing the U.S.-China relationship. During 2017, Xi borrowed a page from Trump’s playbook, believing that the establishment of a personal relationship could achieve China’s strategic objectives. To Xi’s bitterness, this never came to pass. Xi has had to adapt to a world different from that of recent Chinese leaders. Xi’s Tsinghua University colleague Yan Xuetong speaks of a “bipolar” (and digital) world of heightened “chaos and disorder.”<sup>10</sup> Clothed in the narrative of the Thucydides Trap, such ideas have gained increasing credence. But according to Professor Yan, the variable which most perturbs Xi and China’s leadership has to do with “how to deal with Trump’s unpredictability. Because he essentially makes decisions [on] his own, there is little continuity between these decisions, and it is very difficult to predict.”

Xi’s authoritarian management of domestic policy—including his absolute emphasis on the primacy of the CCP, control of the internet and his support of crackdowns on human rights and civil discourse—has also played a significant role in China’s ongoing political and economic climate as well as Xi’s unprecedented accumulation of power.<sup>11</sup> Former Australian Prime

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<sup>9</sup> Mercy A. Kuo, ‘On the Couch in Beidahe: The Political Psychology of China’s President Xi Jinping: Insights from Dr. Kenneth Dekleva,’ *The Diplomat*, August 21, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/on-the-couch-in-beidaihe-the-political-psychology-of-chinas-president-xi-jinping>

<sup>10</sup> David Bandurski, ‘Yan Xuetong on the Bipolar State of Our World,’ *China Media Project*, June 26, 2018, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/06/26/yan-xuetong-on-the-bipolar-state-of-our-world>; Yan Xuetong, ‘Bipolar Rivalry in the Early Digital Age,’ *Chinese Jour Int Politics* Vol 13, No. 3, 2020, pp. 313-341; Kenneth Dekleva, ‘The Reckoning: Donald Trump and Xi Jinping,’ *The Cipher Brief*, August 3, 2020, [https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column\\_article/the-reckoning-donald-trump-and-xi-jinping](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-reckoning-donald-trump-and-xi-jinping)

<sup>11</sup> Richard McGregor, *Xi Jinping: The Backlash* (Sydney: Penguin Books, 2019)

Minister Kevin Rudd has described Xi's rule to date as "a master class in political warfare."<sup>12</sup> But Xi's "master class" is being threatened by the current COVID-19 pandemic, and many observers have recently suggested that Xi's power is seriously imperiled.<sup>13</sup> Such views are likely mistaken. They fail to account for not only Xi's leadership skills but also his sense of who he is and his marriage of that sensibility with China's rejuvenation and national destiny. Do not bet against Xi quite yet.

In dealing with the challenges of Hong Kong's civil demonstrations and recent legal changes, a slowing Chinese economy and the U.S.-China trade talks, Xi has exhibited his characteristic resolve, patience and strategic vision. He has shied away from impulsive actions contrary to the predictions of many pundits. But with the 2019 Coronavirus outbreak, both Xi and the CCP leadership have had missteps, leading some observers to wonder if his rule—or the rule of the Party—is under serious challenge.<sup>14</sup> Such thinking ignores Xi's personal history and his previous responses to political and economic challenges. Like most Chinese, Xi would intuitively appreciate that the Chinese character for "crisis" means both "danger" and "an incipient moment where a situation may change." Xi's response to the Coronavirus epidemic suggests that he had lost some of his earlier deftness and soft power touch (one of his biggest assets in this regard was always First Lady Peng Liyuan) while recently exhibiting a leadership style which represents a combination of ideology, personality and cognitive rigidity—a phenomenon often observed in

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<sup>12</sup> Kevin Rudd, 'Understanding China's Rise Under Xi Jinping,' Address at West Point Military Academy, March 5, 2018, <https://kevinrudd.com/portfolio-item/kevin-rudd-speaks-to-the-us-military-academy-west-point-understanding-chinas-rise-under-xi-jinping>

<sup>13</sup> Xu Zhangrun, 'Viral Alarm: When Fury Overcomes Fear,' China File, February 10, 2020, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/viral-alarm-when-fury-overcomes-fear>

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'Xi Jinping's Coronavirus Challenge,' The Cipher Brief, February 10, 2020, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/xi-jinpings-coronavirus-challenge>; Kenneth Dekleva, 'Xi Jinping, Coronavirus and the New Cold War,' The Hill, February 27, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/484174-xi-jinping-coronavirus-and-the-new-cold-war>; Kenneth Dekleva, 'China's Response to COVID-19 and what it teaches us about Xi Jinping,' The Cipher Brief, March 26, 2020, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/opinion/chinas-response-to-covid-19-and-what-it-teaches-us-about-xi-jinping>

aging leaders. But having so enumerated the Chinese Dream, and nurtured its social, political, economic and psychological expectations, Xi can ill afford to backtrack. For Xi and the Chinese nation, “rejuvenation” is the polar opposite of “humiliation.”

Many experts have written that the Coronavirus represents a crisis because of its pandemic nature and the potential havoc it may cause for an already slowed, debt-laden Chinese economy. But they miss how it may also represent an opportunity, if properly managed by Xi and the Chinese leadership. The Chinese have shown an aggressive public health response to the Coronavirus epidemic, quarantining multiple cities with millions of inhabitants each. In Hubei province alone, over 60 million people were quarantined. China has partnered with the WHO in making attempts to work with international partners to stave off the epidemic. But serious questions have arisen regarding the origins of the outbreak in Wuhan, with U.S. and other intelligence agencies examining hypotheses that the outbreak started with an accidental leak from a virology lab in Wuhan. With Xi’s implicit blessing, Chinese state media has countered such questions with aggressive disinformation and propaganda (a.k.a., “Wolf Warrior diplomacy”) suggesting that the United States, rather, is to blame for the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

During the course of the Coronavirus epidemic, it has been easy to forget China’s ambitions dovetailed with Xi’s great dream of rejuvenation of the Chinese people. A major component of this plan involves Xi’s “Made in China 2025.” Although Western observers have tended to focus on China’s efforts in robotics and artificial intelligence, they have often neglected its innovative efforts in biotechnology. Chinese scientists can be expected, with Xi’s encouragement, to turn such energies towards biomedicine and the development of rapid vaccines. And more recently,

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<sup>15</sup> Mihir Sharma, ‘Diplomacy is Another Victim of the Virus,’ Bloomberg News, April 26, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-04-26/china-s-wolf-warrior-officials-herald-the-end-of-diplomacy>

China's success regarding the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—the world's largest trading bloc—represents a huge accomplishment for Xi, as he pushes forth a globalist, multilateral agenda, but one in which China emerges stronger.

Quoting Rudd, Western analysts should use caution when projecting onto China “an image of their preferred imaginings, rather than one reflecting the actual statements of China's own leaders, or in the physical evidence of Chinese statecraft. These have long pointed to a vastly different reality.”<sup>16</sup> So Xi is worth watching very carefully, without a rush to judgment, as the Coronavirus pandemic evolves and Xi, the Party and China continue to shape a response to this novel, frightening pathogen.

To truly understand Xi is to accept his quintessential Chinese qualities, resilience and psychological strength. This understanding also requires not conceptualizing Xi as merely another Mao or “Red Princeling”, but rather as his father's son. Xi Zhongxun was one of Mao's closest comrades and a founder of modern China as a veteran of the Long March and a survivor of Kang Sheng's 1930s purges. Xi Zhongxun was also the youngest vice prime minister in China during the 1950s and, along with Deng Xiaoping, a leader of reform and “opening up” during the late 1970s. The elder Xi was also, in his own manner, “impressive.”<sup>17</sup> In summary, observers of Xi Jinping might thereby appreciate the qualities that bind together father and son. For, in the words of English poet William Wordsworth, “the child is father to the man.”

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<sup>16</sup> Kevin Rudd, ‘What the West Doesn't Get About Xi Jinping,’ New York Times, March 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/20/opinion/xi-jinping-china-west.html>

<sup>17</sup> Graham Allison et al., *Lee Kwan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Boston: MIT Press, 2013)

## **Kim Jong-un: Dreams of White Horses**

For several generations of U.S. government North Korea analysts, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been one of the most vexing intelligence targets.<sup>18</sup> Although this has much to do with its hermetically sealed and tightly controlled society, a larger part has to do with the opacity of its leadership since its founding in 1948. In this sense, Chairman Kim Jong-un is no less challenging to analyze than his grandfather Kim Il-sung (the Great Leader) and his father Kim Jong-il (the Dear Leader).<sup>19</sup> When the young Kim took power in late 2011, following his father's death from heart disease, little to nothing was known about him—not even his age (27 at that time).<sup>20</sup> The world media was treated to the sight of a weeping young Kim, leading his father's funeral procession. Now, nine years later, all of the other funeral attendants at the procession have been purged or killed, and Kim appears firmly in control of the DPRK.

Although Kim had a childhood of privilege, there are suggestions that it was a lonely childhood without close playmates in Pyongyang. He spent several years away from his parents, during which time he attended a boarding school in Bern, Switzerland, where according to all accounts he was an ordinary middle-schooler who enjoyed basketball, video games and rap music. As Kim's father was known to be a late-night workaholic, it can be surmised that Kim saw little of him during his formative years. A critical question thus becomes, whom did Kim trust as a child? Whom does he trust now, as a leader?

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<sup>18</sup> For several excellent biographies of Kim Jong-un, see Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019); Chung Min Lee, *The Hermit King: The Dangerous Game of Kim Jong Un* (New York: All Points Books, 2020); and Jung H. Pak, *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> Ra Jong-yil, *Inside North Korea's Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-thaek* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019)

<sup>20</sup> Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History Revised and Updated* (New York: Basic Books, 2014)

Prior to 2018, Kim had never met with a single foreign leader. All that the United States could glean about him came from his visits with Dennis Rodman, a flamboyant former professional basketball star. It is intriguing to wonder if Kim's formative years in Europe, combined with his recent diplomatic trips, have shaped his views of economic development and reform. In late 2017, following a series of nuclear and missile tests over a period of several years, Kim sent signals to China, and later, to both South Korea (officially, the Republic of Korea [ROK] and the host of the 2018 Winter Olympics) and the United States, that he was ready to emerge from his diplomatic isolation.

Kim's introductory signals began following China's 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in October 2017. Kim (who had never met Chinese President Xi Jinping) sent Xi a personal congratulatory note thereafter, wishing him "great success," using laudatory language not seen in the context of the then cooler relations between China and North Korea. Importantly, North Korea had not tested any nuclear devices since September 2017 and clearly did not wish to embarrass China prior to, during or after its monumental 19th CCP Congress, or prior to the state visit to China in November 2017 by U.S. President Donald Trump. Following Xi's summit with Trump, China dispatched a senior envoy, Minister Song Tao of the Party's International Department, to North Korea for a high-level visit and meetings with senior North Korean officials. Chinese and North Korean media highlighted the visit and the importance of friendship between the two countries as "a source of valuable wealth."

In Kim's 2018 New Year's speech, he spoke of North Korea's successful development of nuclear weapons through 2017. But what many observers missed were his comments stating that he was "open to dialogue" with Seoul and his willingness to send a delegation to the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. Kim further highlighted that "we wish the Games will be a

success.” This was a far cry from his father’s role in a deadly terrorist attack (on a civilian airliner, killing all of its passengers) prior to the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul. The 2018 Winter Olympics provided a worldwide stage for Kim’s bravura performance. He dispatched his sister, Kim Yo-jong (an alternate member of the DPRK’s Politburo), to the opening ceremonies, and she captivated the media with her grace and charm. She met with South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in, bringing Kim Jong-un’s invitation to host Moon at a summit in North Korea—the first such high-level meeting since 2007. At the closing ceremonies, North Korea’s delegate, General Kim Yong-chol, expressed North Korea’s “willingness” to talk to the United States. Later, Kim Jong-un hosted a high-level South Korean delegation in Pyongyang to prepare for an April 2018 summit with Moon. Media reports highlighted a charming and energetic Kim hosting the delegation during an intimate dinner.

Kim has throughout his career shown a high degree of ruthlessness, starting with the 2010 sinking of the South Korean Navy ship *Cheonan*, his purges of hundreds of senior personnel, the murder of his uncle Jang Song-thaek in 2013 and the assassination in Singapore—using a chemical weapon—of his half-brother Kim Jong-nam in 2017. But Kim Jong-un has also shown the ability to co-opt military and security elites with his ambitious development of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program. He has also shown a more public persona, élan, style—aided by his wife Ri Sol-ju—and visibility, akin to that of Kim Il-sung, thereby building upon his grandfather’s heroic legacy. Interestingly, he has also given important positions and visibility to his younger sister, Kim Yo-jong, who also serves in high-level roles in the propaganda department and the Workers’ Party of Korea’s Organization and Guidance Department, a key power center in the DPRK’s system of government. Kim Jong-un has also shown a side similar to his grandfather in his famous onsite inspection visits, often jovially hugging employees and

posing for photos. In this sense, both he and his grandfather are different from Kim Jong-il, who rarely spoke publicly and only traveled to Russia and China. Kim Jong-un's differences from his father and grandfather are a measure of his youth, diplomatic talent, style, trust in his wife and sister (both of whom have traveled internationally with him) and ability to think and act more strategically, rather than impulsively.

Although not an economic reformer per se, Kim has tolerated some degree of internal market-based activity, allowing the DPRK's economy to grow and creating visible accomplishments in spite of harsh international sanctions since 2017. In this sense, Kim has demonstrated an aspirational style of leadership, while recognizing that other tangibles—including nuclear weapons—are required in order to sustain his power. Kim has drawn the conclusion—supported by the fates of Iraq, Libya and Ukraine—that nuclear weapons are the only logical course of development regarding both his and the regime's survival.<sup>21</sup> Kim has impressively shown the ability to shift between doctrines of nuclear capabilities and “nuclear opacity,” learning from the experiences of Israel (which has never officially acknowledged possessing nuclear weapons), India and Pakistan.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, North Korea has achieved a strategic objective of both possessing a deterrent and of acting—and de facto being recognized—as a nuclear power.

The DPRK's leadership relies upon a variety of highly nuanced signals in terms of gauging the United States' intentions and strategic posture. Kim and the DPRK's ruling elite are sensitive to nuance (the Chinese call this *shi*, which means the alignment of forces, or the propensity of things to happen) and to loss of face. Words and gestures matter. Given the “heightened

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<sup>21</sup> See William Overholt, *North Korea: Peace? Nuclear War?* (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School, 2019)

<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of nuclear opacity, see George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: Univ of Calif Press, 1999,) and Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1998)

temperature” in the region, face-saving gestures on both sides have always been important. Such diplomatic moves have precedent, as noted by Tong Kim, the U.S. Department of State’s former Korean-language interpreter.<sup>23</sup> In 1994, U.S. President Bill Clinton issued a statement of “sympathy for the North Korean people” when Kim Il-sung died in the middle of U.S.-North Korean nuclear negotiations. When U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang in 2000, she made a brief, quiet visit to the elder Kim’s mausoleum, for which Kim Jong-il profusely thanked her, both for that gesture and for President Clinton’s earlier 1994 message of sympathy.

Since his diplomatic opening in 2018, Kim Jong-un has successfully projected himself and his nation onto the world stage. It would be easy to understand Kim’s recent overtures according to commonly held stereotypes, seeing Kim as responding to a combination of crippling international sanctions and military threats by Trump in late 2017. Kim’s diplomatic style reveals much about his intentions, his psyche and long-term strategy. It has always been tempting—given past “failures” involving the 1994 Agreed Framework, the 2005 Six Party Talks and the February 2019 Hanoi summit—to assume that Kim is borrowing a page from his father’s playbook. But Kim’s projection onto the world stage suggests loftier ambitions. In this sense, he is more like his grandfather than his father. Kim Il-sung was the *master* of grand gestures, having started the Korean War and, later, playing a large role in the Non-Aligned Movement. It is easy to forget that in his waning years, plagued by ill health, Kim Il-sung also sought a “grand bargain” with the United States. In 1992 and 1994, he hosted the late American evangelist Reverend Billy Graham (who in 1992 brought a personal message to Kim Il-sung from U.S.

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<sup>23</sup> Tong Kim, “You Say Okjeryok, I Say Deterrent,” Washington Post, September 25, 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/24/AR2005092400004.html>

President George H. W. Bush), seeking improved relations with the United States. Graham's wife Ruth had spent part of her childhood in Pyongyang. She spoke fondly of "the beauty of the two rivers that flow through the city of Pyongyang and the warmth and hospitality of the people."<sup>24</sup> The North Korean government and its leadership—including Kim Jong-un—are exquisitely attuned to such nuance and symbols.

It is easy to forget how difficult such diplomacy can be. In the late 1960s, a delicate opening of U.S. diplomacy to China began under auspices similar to those seen today in the recent diplomatic initiatives by North Korea, South Korea and the United States.<sup>25</sup> Diplomacy then involved reaching out to a nuclear-armed nation with whom the United States had not had diplomatic relations for decades, a nation whose rhetoric and threat perception bore similarity to the missives coming from North Korea's official media and foreign ministry. And the nuclear threat from China in the 1960s—as with the threat from North Korea in 2017—was potent and very real, enough so that the development of the U.S. anti-ballistic missile program in the late 1960s was predicated upon being able to deny China the ability to inflict a first strike upon the United States.

At that time, China and its Great Helmsman—Mao Zedong—were not seen as rational negotiating partners, but rather as mad, irrational actors on the world stage. Images and media reports of China's violent, chaotic Cultural Revolution did little to dispel such views. Yet the diplomatic minuet began, and signals and openings emerged, though the United States missed many of them. These involved interviews with westerners (Edgar Snow), sports competitions (an international ping-pong tournament held in Beijing), secretive diplomatic openings in Warsaw

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<sup>24</sup> Janet Chismar, "The Graham Family Legacy in North Korea, BGEA, July 30, 2008

<sup>25</sup> For the best accounts of the historic opening to China, see Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York: Little, Brown and Co, 1979), and Vernon Walters, *Silent Missions* (New York: Doubleday and Co, 1978)

and Paris and foreign interlocutors. It even included hostage releases (CIA paramilitary officers John Downey and Richard Fecteau, who had been imprisoned since 1952, and were not released until 1973) and a secret, preparatory trip to China by then National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, leading up to President Richard Nixon's February 1972 summit with China's Mao.

The historical context of the opening to China in the late 1960s and early 1970s has odd parallels to the recent diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Kim, Xi, Moon, Trump and Putin. China's experience with the United States can help observers understand that Kim has borrowed from this historic playbook as well as from strategies that are more modern.

In the late 1990s, Scott Snyder's *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* portrayed North Korean leaders and diplomats as utilizing harsh, "scorched earth" negotiating tactics in order to prevail and achieve their national security interests.<sup>26</sup> It would be convenient to see Kim's political behavior in the past two years as more of the same. Such thinking is akin to a diplomatic analogue of a cognate, or a "false friend." Rather, Kim's recent political behavior is more of a classic negotiating strategy, as has already created powerful, novel symbols of both his nation's and South Korea's yearning for peace.<sup>27</sup> The 2018 Moon-Kim summit in Panmunjom powerfully showed values dear to Korean culture: respect, filial piety, harmony and order. They spoke in private, appearing to listen intently; they held hands as they walked across the border of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ); and they planted a tree. Cold War symbols of U.S. negotiator Paul Nitze's and Soviet Ambassador Yuli Kvitsinsky's legendary "walk in the woods" on the outskirts of Geneva suddenly resonated.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington DC: USIP, 1999)

<sup>27</sup> John Delury, 'Panmunjom Spring,' May 1, 2018, 38 North, <https://www.38north.org/2018/05/jdelury050118>

<sup>28</sup> Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision: A Memoir* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1989)

Kim started 2019 with a well-rehearsed New Year's address, in which he utilized a less formal and more relaxed atmosphere—akin to Xi's New Year's addresses—and wore a western-style business suit. In his address, Kim spoke of his diplomatic successes during 2018, his emphasis upon economic development, peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula. He also articulated his desire to further a new relationship with the United States as well as to denuclearize safely.

In early 2019, Kim made his fourth visit to China, traveling to Beijing by train on a 20-hour ride, first made famous by his grandfather Kim Il-sung in 1982, and by his father Kim Jong-il in 2011.<sup>29</sup> The symbolism of Kim Jong-un's trip was highly important to both the Chinese and North Korean leadership. According to Chinese state media, Xi told Kim that Beijing supported a second summit between the North Korean leader and Trump, adding that he hoped they would “meet each other halfway,” and that the “political settlement of the [Korean] Peninsula issue faces a rare historic opportunity.” Kim also said that North Korea would make efforts to “achieve results that will be welcomed by the international community.”

The failure of the 2019 Hanoi summit between Kim and Trump led to a sense of disappointment given the cancellation of their talks without any formal agreement. In walking away from a deal in Hanoi, Kim borrowed a page from Trump's playbook (“sometimes you have to walk”), intuitively realizing that doing so engenders the highest mark of respect. What remains unclear is whether Kim miscalculated, only later realizing, as did Xi, that having a warm, personal

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, ‘Chairman Kim Jong-un Rides the Peace Train,’”The Cipher Brief, January 22, 2019, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/quick-take/chairman-kim-jong-un-rides-the-peace-train>

relationship with Trump is no guarantee of a deal which serves his and the DPRK's strategic interests.<sup>30</sup>

Russia's ties with North Korea date from the late 1940s, when Soviet Political Commissar Colonel-General Terenti Shtykov (later, Russia's first Ambassador to the DPRK) was present at, and assisted with, the DPRK's creation.<sup>31</sup> Such ties remain solid, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's recent May 2018 visit to Pyongyang, where he met with Chairman Kim, hinted at emerging improved relations. Earlier, in January 2018, Putin had referred to Kim as "an absolutely competent and already mature politician," signaling his desire to establish warmer relations with the DPRK.<sup>32</sup>

Western observers would be mistaken to minimize Russia's role in ongoing diplomacy with the DPRK. Putin has a history of skillfully combining nostalgia, shared historical experience and strategic imperatives to improve Russia's relations with other countries. In recent years, the legacy of the late Russian Ambassador (2001-2006) to the DPRK, Andrei Karlov, deserves special mention. He spent a total of seventeen years in Pyongyang, including five years as ambassador, and considered North Korea "his second homeland." According to his widow Marina Karlova, who gave an exclusive interview ("The Last Dragoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry") to the Russian monthly investigative intelligence magazine *Sovershenno Sekretno*,<sup>33</sup> he was one of the rare foreign friends of North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-il. Karlova

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'So, After Hanoi: What is Kim Thinking?,' The Cipher Brief, March 7, 2019, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/profile/so-after-hanoi-what-is-kim-thinking>

<sup>31</sup> Andrei Lankov, 'Terenti Shtykov: the other ruler of nascent N. Korea,' The Korea Times, January 25, 2012, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/01/363\\_103451.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/01/363_103451.html)

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'Putin, Trump and North Korea: The Road to Washington Leads Through Asia,' 38 North, July 12, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/07/kdekleva071218>; Kenneth Dekleva, 'What Could a Russia-North Korea Summit Mean?,' The Cipher Brief, April 24, 2019, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/opinion/what-could-a-russia-north-korea-summit-mean>

<sup>33</sup> Andrei Kolobaev, 'The Last Dragoman of the Foreign Ministry,' *Sovershenno Sekretno*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/posledniy-dragoman-mida>

said her husband spent many evenings with Kim Jong-il and his closest associates, dining together and singing Russian and Soviet songs.

Although two former U.S. presidents—Jimmy Carter in 1994 and Bill Clinton in 2009—had made rare visits to Pyongyang, meeting with Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il respectively, it was in June 2019 that Trump made history as a sitting president. By meeting with Kim Jong-un in a hastily arranged meeting at Panmunjom, Trump seized the moment and took several steps with Kim across the DMZ. He thereby became the first sitting U.S. president to set foot on North Korean soil, a moment of historic and symbolic significance.<sup>34</sup>

Following historic summits in Singapore and Hanoi, Trump's and Kim's unconventional, theatrical and even "reality TV" style of diplomacy has been widely disparaged, with critics seeing it as lacking in substance and overly focused on personal, transactional relationships. Trump's approach to dealing with Kim has been untraditional, relying upon devices such as an exchange of letters, tweeting and even showing Kim a video during the 2018 Singapore summit.<sup>35</sup> But Trump has succeeded in engaging the North Korean leader and, to date, along with Kim and Moon, has achieved partial successes, in that Kim has not tested a nuclear weapon or ICBM since late 2017. Trump spoke of being honored to set foot on North Korean soil, surprising even Kim, who praised his courage, stating that he had not expected that they would meet at the DMZ. Kim, like his father and grandfather, understands optics too.

The year 2019 brought new challenges with a slowdown in diplomatic engagement, further weapons testing by North Korea and other domestic and foreign policy pressures threatening to

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'North Korea and Nobel Prizes,' The Cipher Brief, July 3, 2019, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/opinion/north-korea-and-nobel-prizes>

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'A Hypothetical Letter from Chairman Kim Jong Un to President Donald Trump,' 38 North, June 7, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/06/kdekleva060719/>

derail the bold initiatives of Kim, Moon and Trump.<sup>36</sup> North Korea's recent missile tests, the unveiling of potential new submarine capabilities and its increased activities in cyber warfare (as well as theft of intellectual property and hacking of financial institutions) suggest that Kim has embraced a shift from strategic patience and nuclear opacity to a form of strategic ruthlessness. Kim's soaring rhetoric, idealism and desire for peace, combined with his symbolic embrace of Moon in 2018, was moving and powerful—and positioned Kim as a legitimate negotiating partner. The fact that Kim hosted Moon and allowed him to speak extemporaneously for seven minutes to a crowd of 150,000 Pyongyang citizens speaks greatly to Kim's confidence and posture as a leader.

Kim—with whom Trump had bragged about “falling in love” with during 2018 and 2019—has recently been silent regarding Trump. But his high-level deputies, including senior DPRK leaders such as Kim Yong-chol, UN Ambassador Kim Song and Vice-Minister Choe Son-hui, have recently publicly criticized Trump and his policies towards the DPRK. Both have stated that denuclearization is “off the table,” returning to the hostile language of 2017 when the DPRK's media and top officials referred to the president as a “dotard.” Kim Jong-un's recent symbolic actions (e.g., his recent visits on horseback to Mt. Paektu, which is sacred to both Koreas and to the Kim dynasty) had suggested to many a return to “Fire and Fury” and to the political, military and diplomatic challenges of 2017. At the recent December 2019 plenum, Kim, rather than giving his traditional New Year's speech, outlined a different strategy toward the United States for 2020. In doing so, he highlighted the dignity of the the DPRK, a return to a combination of military and economic development and the requirement for the people to tighten

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, ‘A Fading Chance for Improvement with North Korea,’ The Cipher Brief, September 19, 2019, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/opinion/a-fading-chance-for-improvement-with-north-korea>

their belts during a period of prolonged sanctions. Kim's strategic shift portends not only political, military and diplomatic changes, but also offers clues as to his evolving leadership style, intentions and flexibility as he begins his ninth year in power.

The critical issue of Kim's health has arisen over the past several years. He has a positive family history of cardiovascular disease and stroke. He likely suffers from morbid obesity, as defined by a BMI (body mass index) greater than 40.0, and he is a heavy smoker. He may also suffer from hypertension, secondary diabetes and elevated cholesterol. Hypothetical risk calculations, using a program called Astro-CHARM developed at UTSW Medical Center-Dallas in conjunction with NASA,<sup>37</sup> suggest that Kim's ten-year risk of having a significant event—fatal or non-fatal—such as myocardial infarction or stroke could be as high as 33 percent. If Kim quits smoking and manages other potential risk factors, his 10-year risk drops to 3 to 4 percent. Therefore, Kim's health status bears watching over the next several years, especially given his recent three-week absence (during early 2020) from the public eye and reports of a possible cardiac procedure.<sup>38</sup>

Applying Occam's Razor (i.e., the idea that the most likely explanation for an event is usually the simplest explanation) to Kim's seven-hour speech at the 2019 Central Committee plenum, as well as to his subsequent personnel changes in the Foreign Ministry, it is tempting to judge that Kim has returned to his earlier *byungjin* policy. This policy approach combines an emphasis on both economic as well as military development. One might also reasonably conclude that his recent political behavior presages a return to the DPRK's hard-edged negotiating style.

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<sup>37</sup> Amit Khera et al., 'Astronaut Cardiovascular Health and Risk Modification (Astro-CHARM) Coronary Calcium Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease Risk Calculator,' *Circulation* Vol 138, No. 17, 2018, pp. 1819-1827

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'I Am Kim's Heart: The Health Status of Chairman Kim Jong Un,' 38 North, April 28, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/04/kdekleva042820>

Kim's diplomatic travels during 2018 and 2019 to China, Russia, Singapore and Hanoi have attracted worldwide attention, and in recent years, he has come across as an adroit statesman. He has sometimes been referred to as impatient, but this misses the point. His impatience may be a function of external political pressures rather than a mere reflection of his personality. Certainly, after his 2019 New Year's speech, warning of a change in strategy should the United States not change its diplomatic approach, Kim has shown restraint and patience. He has not tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) or resumed nuclear testing—nor is he likely to do so, although a public “display” of a new ICBM or ballistic missile submarine is not out of the question.<sup>39</sup>

Kim has recently substituted strategic ambiguity for the nuclear opacity he previously demonstrated in 2018. Doing so highlights his strategic sensibility and use of hybrid, asymmetric and “gray zone” approaches to diplomacy. Importantly, although disappointed and likely humiliated by his failure to achieve sanctions relief at the 2019 Hanoi Summit with Trump, Kim has refrained from attacking Trump personally. More saliently, he has learned—as did Xi—that a personal, warm and transactional relationship with Trump has not necessarily led to enduring strategic benefits for the DPRK. Lastly, his speech at the recent plenum highlighted the importance of national dignity and a need for “tightening [their] belts” for now. His use of the term “the dignity of the country” comes across as personal and deeply ingrained. That is Kim's true “red line.”

The COVID-19 pandemic (as well as the recent tragic typhoons and worsening famine) has tested Kim's leadership skills, as has been the case for other world leaders. It is indeed a

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<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, ‘The Many Faces of Chairman Kim Jong Un,’ 38 North, January 30, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/01/kdekleva013020/>

leadership crucible. Kim moved quickly to seal the borders with Russia and China. He has also embarked upon a media and public health campaign to emphasize social distancing and other mitigation measures. This reveals not only his prudence, but also highlights an important difference between Kim and his father, as well as grandfather, for COVID-19 threatens not only Kim's rule, but also more broadly, the legitimacy of his power and that of the nation. In acting to protect the well-being of the nation, Kim has revealed a different (and more emotional) side of his leadership style.

Kim remains an aspirational leader, even as the DPRK's diplomacy is likely to shift to a more muscular, hard-edged version given the replacement of Ri Yong-ho and appointment of Ri Songwon (a hardliner and protégé of Kim Yong-chol) as foreign minister.<sup>40</sup> Kim Jong-un is patiently waiting and avoiding unnecessary political risks, knowing that time is on his and the DPRK's side. With Kim's singular sense of destiny, his grandfather's dream of a peace treaty and formal diplomatic recognition by the United States remains elusive but within reach.

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Carlin, 'Note on DPRK Foreign Ministry Shakeup,' 38 North, January 21, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/01/rcarlin012120>

## Vladimir Putin: Disruptive Diplomacy

In 2000, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, at that time relatively unknown outside of Russia, visited Japan. Part of his trip included a visit to the *Kodokan*, the historic Judo school founded by Jigoro Kano. Putin participated in a demonstration, showing off his martial arts skills with a young Japanese student, who threw him using a classic hip throw. Afterwards, Putin bowed formally to her with grace and good cheer, and the crowd gave him a warm ovation. Several years later, after the tragic terrorist attack in Beslan where over 300 schoolchildren lost their lives in its carnage, an emotionally distraught Putin spoke to a sorrowful nation, telling Russians that they had been beaten "because of our weakness."

These vignettes reveal different sides of Russia's leader, who grew up in the haunted aftermath of Leningrad's World War II siege—where dinner-table conversations with his traumatized, war-weary parents were few and far between—and whose rise to power presaged Russia's crusade to recapture its previous glories. Although Putin is no stranger to U.S. policymakers, he remains—even after two decades in power—an enigmatic, poorly understood leader.<sup>1</sup> Recent events involving allegations of Russian cyber warfare, interference in the 2016 U.S. election, sponsorship of assassination attempts on foreign soil and military action in support of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad have highlighted a key dictum: understanding Russia's political actions, especially in the foreign policy sphere, requires a keen and sober analysis of Putin's political psychology. This presupposes a deeper sense of Putin's many faces, sensibility and humanity—the essence of what makes him tick.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Dekleva, 'The Many Faces of Vladimir Putin: A Political Psychology Profile,' The Cipher Brief, January 22, 2017, [https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column\\_article/the-many-faces-of-vladimir-putin-a-political-psychology-profile](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/the-many-faces-of-vladimir-putin-a-political-psychology-profile)

<sup>2</sup> For several biographies of Putin, see Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013); Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*

Many profiles of Putin have missed the mark, labeling him as a “thug” or seeing him as a mere tool of larger, more intricate power structures or groupings, such as the *siloviki*—Russia’s military, law enforcement and intelligence communities. Such analyses of Putin’s political behavior have led to a lack of predictive power regarding Russia’s actions, heightened emotional predictions of a new Cold War and even the anticipation of military conflict between Russia and the West. A careful reading of Putin’s writings, interviews and speeches offers analysts a treasure trove of material, which reveals his many faces: politician, intelligence officer, martial artist and diplomat.<sup>3</sup>

As president, Putin quickly prioritized bringing Russia out of the political and economic morass of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), which he famously called “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.” Although rising oil and natural gas prices during the 2000s bolstered Russia’s economy, allowing improved standards of living, Putin’s sense of organization, self-discipline and shrewd management of domestic policy during that time also played a significant role in Russia’s political and economic restoration.

What many analysts missed over the years is the degree to which Putin’s revanchist views, and his campaign to restore Russia’s pride and place in the world, hold a powerful social, emotional and psychological appeal for ordinary Russians. This accounts in large part for Putin’s consistently high political popularity ratings—above 70 percent during most of his tenure—which no other politician in Russia can match. Although his style of management smacks of a strong, decisive, authoritarian streak—he can be perceived as Russia’s Charles de Gaulle

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(Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015); Angela Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve Books, 2019); Catherine Belton, *Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West* (New York: FSG, 2019)

<sup>3</sup> See this revealing work by Vladimir Putin et al., *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2000)

(modern France's most influential president)—Putin has shown a canny ability to influence and win the allegiance of Russia's political and security elite.

As a leader, Putin respects strength, iron discipline and control—traits that he himself exudes during his annual news conferences and public call-in sessions. Although Western media often describe Putin as a cold, unemotional politician, he has on occasion shown otherwise. For instance, following his 2012 return to the presidency, television revealed a different side of Putin, showing him becoming emotional and tearing up during a victory speech given to his supporters.

Putin's background as an intelligence officer in the Soviet Union's main security agency (KGB) has colored his entire professional life. The KGB shaped his ethos and his sense of identity. Service in the KGB was his boyhood dream. Commentary that either vilifies his KGB service, or downplays it, misses a more important question having to do with how Putin's skills have manifested themselves. Many have tended to see Putin as merely tactical rather than strategic. But such a view is mistaken. Seeing such labels as dichotomous loses sight of Putin's adaptability regarding foreign policy challenges from Ukraine and Georgia to Syria and China. At times, Putin has shown tactical flexibility, often reversing course and shifting priorities, while not deviating from key strategic concerns and his sense of Russia's national interest. A different concern has to do with Putin's inner circle of advisors, many of whom he has known and worked with for decades. Whom does he trust and listen to? How do strategic decisions get made? Changes in personnel within the Kremlin and key ministries over the past several years

bear careful study in this regard. Some observers have tended to see Putin as very much keeping his own counsel and projecting a lonely, isolated figure of power.<sup>4</sup>

Martial arts and the study of Judo has likely shaped Putin's personality as much as any other activity. A student of Judo since his childhood, Putin spoke eloquently (in a video he made in 2008) of its virtues of discipline, respect for one's teachers and fellow practitioners and humility.<sup>5</sup> Holder of an eighth-dan rank, Putin is the highest-ranking non-Japanese *judoka* in the world and a true ambassador of the art. Videos of Putin demonstrating Judo highlight not only his immense talent but also a playful and competitive style, which for Putin—for whom Judo is a way of life—colors his political behavior as well.

In late 2018, Putin attempted to mount a charm offensive even while supporting a number of actions that have drawn worldwide criticism, including the Russian foreign military-intelligence agency (GRU) sponsored attempted assassination (using the nerve agent *Novichok*) of former GRU officer Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England. The GRU-sponsored hacking of websites in Western Europe and election interference in the United States are other prime examples.

Through it all, attention has focused on Putin's KGB background, aggressive tactics and highly disruptive style of political behavior.

The West's response, with its vigorous sanctions, has tended to portray Putin as a supreme tactician, particularly in light of his experience as a KGB officer, as well as a *judoka*. What is often missed in portraying Putin as a mere tactician and expert at playing a weak hand are the Russian President's diplomatic abilities, which allow him to maneuver his way through crises—

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<sup>4</sup> Hubert Seipel, *Putin: Logika Vlasti* (Moscow: Vremja, 2018)

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin et al., *Judo: History, Theory, Practice* (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2004)

even those of his own making or with his explicit support—to achieve strategic results, which he sees in Russia’s best long-term interests.

Putin served as a KGB officer from 1985-1990 and polished his skills in the 1990s while working as the deputy mayor in St. Petersburg, where he handled relations with international investors. As many of the investors were from Germany, the position allowed Putin to use his German language skills to woo investors, politicians, bankers, diplomats and civic leaders alike. Putin’s German language skills are no mere accident. He has studied the language since childhood—the language of the enemy—an enemy which caused immense damage and human suffering for the USSR. Even Putin’s own family suffered during the horrific 900-day siege of Leningrad that claimed a million lives during World War II. But Putin saw a value in mastering the German language and has spoken of his joy at making the language truly his own. In a 2001 speech to the German Bundestag, Putin spoke of the richness of German culture and language, of how he saw Russia as being part of that broader European tradition and of being humbled to address them in the language of Goethe, Schiller and Kant. Although heavily accented, Putin’s stirring words nonetheless brought the entire Bundestag to its feet in a roaring ovation.<sup>6</sup>

It is easy to imagine that Putin’s diplomatic skills owe much to the KGB’s tradition of developing professionals with superb language skills. In fact, Putin’s language skills are likely to some degree an emulation of KGB General Yuri Drozdov (who had directed the famed KGB Illegals Directorate and was immortalized in the movie *Bridge of Spies*). Like Putin, Drozdov not only mastered German to a high level of fluency (during a stint in Germany in the late 1950s), but even took acting classes under Berthold Brecht to deepen his awareness of the body language

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander G. Rahr, *Wladimir Putin: Der Deutsche im Kreml* (Montreal: Universitas Press, 2000)

and unconscious, cultural behaviors of Germans, allowing him to serve successfully as a deep-cover, KGB illegal.<sup>7</sup>

Putin's diplomatic forays are hardly new. He has shown such abilities throughout his career as Russia's president and prime minister. It is worth recalling that as the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, he met with hundreds of foreign dignitaries between 1991 and 1996. Putin's diplomatic experience is likely unmatched by most world leaders on the stage today, especially when combined with his KGB training, personal charm and linguistic abilities. In his relations with various European countries, Putin has sought to revive an earlier diplomatic strategy, Russia's successful program of "Finlandization" during the Cold War, which was carried out with nuance, tact, cultural sensitivity and long-term strategic patience.<sup>8</sup> The KGB sent its top officers to Finland, where many served for decades with distinction, befriending generations of Finnish politicians, businessmen, journalists and civic leaders.<sup>9</sup> Putin is bringing back an old playbook, doing his best to achieve Russia's strategic goals: obtaining sanctions relief and weakening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Central, Eastern and Northern Europe. His approach embodies the uniquely expressive German word *fingerspitzengefühl*, meaning intuitive flair or instinct, which describes exquisite situational awareness and the ability to respond most appropriately to a given situation. This is the essence of Putin's style, one which he continues to display, even as Russia is beset by international sanctions and a dramatically weakened economy (especially following the COVID-19 pandemic and the extreme drop in the price of oil). Putin's diplomatic accomplishments in 2018 and 2019 included meeting with leaders such as China's Xi

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<sup>7</sup> Yuri Drozdov., *Fiction Excluded: Memoirs of an Illegal Intelligence Officer* (Moscow: Artstil Poligrafia, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the KGB's role in Finlandization, see Kimmo Rentola, 'President Urho Kekkonen of Finland and the KGB,' in Pauli Kettunen and Juhana Aunesluoma (eds.), *The Cold War and the Politics of History* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2008)

<sup>9</sup> See Pekka Virki, 'KGB, Finlandisation, and The Struggle for Power in Finland,' Up North, June 18, 2015, <https://upnorth.eu/kgb-finlandisation-and-the-struggle-for-power-in-finland>

Jinping, Austria's Sebastian Kurz, North Korea's Kim Jong-un, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Iran's Hassan Rouhani, Germany's Angela Merkel, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, America's Donald Trump, India's Narendra Modi and numerous African leaders (during the 2019 Russia-Africa summit).

Putin remains the ultimate survivor, a true expert at playing—and maximizing—a weak hand. He has weathered many storms during his childhood, adolescence and adulthood, including during his lengthy political career. It remains to be seen what effect the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact upon the Russian economy (due to declining oil prices) has on Putin's power. The ongoing sanctions regime, Russia's fatigue with Putinism and Russia's lessened role in a world where "the future is Asian" are added strains on Putin's control. In COVID-19, the worst pandemic in recent memory, Putin may have finally met his match.<sup>10</sup> Putin remains, however, a leader to watch during the remainder of his term, and likely beyond, as he has repeatedly shown the resilience, strategic aspiration and diplomatic savvy to re-emerge on the world stage as a formidable adversary and truly "first among equals."

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Osborn, 'Putin's Problems Mount as Coronavirus Hits Russian Economy,' Reuters, April 22, 2020

## Future Directions

This article has outlined both the historic and current utility of leadership analysis in helping national security personnel, policymakers and academic scholars in understanding the psychology and intentions of adversary leaders. The discipline remains utilized at the national security level nearly 60 years after Jerrold Post first developed such a unit at the Central Intelligence Agency, although its precise influence in any given decision-maker's calculus is impossible to measure. But that record of longevity speaks for itself. The discipline continues to seek understanding and to build appreciation of the complex motives and intentions of opaque, authoritarian, adversarial leaders. This is especially so where power and decision-making are heavily concentrated, and where there exists a high degree of opacity with a given leader. Such concentration is especially true in countries like Iran, China, Russia, Syria and North Korea, which are commonly the hardest and most challenging of targets for the U.S. intelligence community.<sup>1</sup>

How might this discipline evolve over the next decade? It will have to adapt and function in a rapidly changing world with media and social media buzzing in a 24-hour news cycle. How will novel technologies affect the field? Legitimate questions have arisen regarding the role and training of intelligence analysts, psychiatrists, psychologists and clinicians. All have a role in the future of leadership psychology. Intelligence analysis in particular has to inform a whole-of-government approach to counter the gray-zone, hybrid warfare increasingly practiced with great skill by our adversaries. It must also incorporate ways of thinking about "black swan" events,

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Spetalnick, David Brunnstrom, and John Walcott, 'Understanding Kim: Inside the U.S. effort to profile the secretive North Korean leader,' Reuters, April 26, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-trump-kim-insight/understanding-kim-inside-the-u-s-effort-to-profile-the-secretive-north-korean-leader-idUSKBN1HX0GK>

although it could be argued that recent intelligence failures (such as accurately predicting the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1998 Indian nuclear tests, the 9/11 terror attacks, Russia's 2014 invasion of the Ukraine or COVID-19) were not true black swans, but rather failures of imagination.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge for the field of leadership analysis remains that, when stakes are high, national security policymakers have a reluctance to rely solely upon quantitative data—which often lack a cultural or historical perspective—such as remote psychometric trait analysis, operational code analysis or analyses of integrative complexity.<sup>3</sup> There has historically been a clear bias towards psycho-biographical profiles, though it's difficult to ascertain whether this is a legacy artifact, or whether it's due to other biases. But interlocutors and policymakers still desire the same answers that General William Donovan requested in 1943, when he commissioned Langer's study of Hitler.

Although there are some very promising novel approaches to leadership analysis involving natural language processing,<sup>4</sup> artificial intelligence and crowdsourcing,<sup>5</sup> the use of art in visual

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<sup>2</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: Second edition: The Impact of the Highly Improbable (Incerto)* (New York: Random House, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Aubrey Immelman, 'The Assessment of Political Personality: A Psychodiagnostically Relevant Conceptualization and Methodology,' *Political Psychology* Vol 12, No. 1, 1993), pp. 725-741; Margaret Herman, 'Political Psychology,' in R.A.W. Rhodes and Paul Hart (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford Univ Press, 2014); Peter Suedfeld, 'The Cognitive Processing of Politics and Politicians: Archival Studies of Conceptual and Integrative Complexity,' *Journal of Personality* Vol 78, No. 6, 2010), pp. 1669-1702; Stephen G. Walker, 'The Evolution of Operational Code Analysis,' *Political Psychology* Vol 11, No. 2, 1990, pp. 403-418

<sup>4</sup> Richard Waters, 'Natural Language Understanding Poised to Transform How We Work,' FT, December 2, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/a3943548-e9cb-11e8-94da-a6478f64c783>

<sup>5</sup> Kelsey Ables, 'What happens when China's state-run media embraces AI?,' *Columbia Journalism Rev*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/china-xinhua-news-ai.php>; Sean Gourley, 'Humans, not AIs, will save us from the endless slurry of fake news,' *Wired Magazine*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/artificial-intelligence-fake-news>

intelligence analysis<sup>6</sup> and forecasting prediction,<sup>7</sup> the human factor remains paramount. Human beings with a variety of skills in intelligence analysis, psychology, medicine, cross-cultural approaches, foreign languages and international relations will still be required to make sense of complex, intangible, fuzzy and unpredictable data. This will remain so in the near future because human behavior—including political behavior—remains very difficult to predict. Both experts and machines can be wrong, sometimes dreadfully so. And mistakes in gauging an adversary's intentions can have catastrophic national security and international relations consequences. Leadership analysis as a sub-specialty of strategic intelligence analysis is here to stay, and remains more about Sun Tzu<sup>8</sup> and less about Freud or the latest advances in artificial intelligence. The next generation of leadership analysts must further the discipline and continue to provide policymakers and national security leaders with quality intelligence products in the decades to come.

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<sup>6</sup> Amy E. Herman, *Visual Intelligence: Sharpen Your Perception, Change Your Life* ( New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2020); Kenneth Dekleva, 'Kim Jong-il's 'Flowers for Kin Il Sung',' 38 North, August 19, 2010, <https://www.38north.org/2010/08/kim-jong-il%e2%80%99s-%e2%80%9cflowers-for-kim-il-sung%e2%80%9d/>; Ruediger Frank, 'Harbinger or Hoax: A First Painting of Kim Jong Un?,' 38 North, December 8, 2010, [https://www.38north.org/2010/12/kim\\_jong\\_un\\_painting\\_hoax/](https://www.38north.org/2010/12/kim_jong_un_painting_hoax/)

<sup>7</sup> Fred Morstatter et al., 'SAGE: A Hybrid Geopolitical Forecasting System,' *Proc. Of the 28<sup>th</sup> International Joint Conf on Artificial Intelligence (IJCAI-19)*, 2019; Phillip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016)

<sup>8</sup> Sun Tzu and Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Art of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1994)