

8/4/94

Number 232

NORTH KOREA'S LATEST CHALLENGE: THE TRANSITION TO KIM JONG-IL

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 131, "Fixing Jimmy Carter's Mistakes: Regaining the Initiative Against North Korea," July 8, 1994.)

North Korea poses the greatest threat to peace in Asia. It has 1.1 million men under arms and may be on the verge of becoming a nuclear weapons power. On July 27, Kang Myong-do, the son-in-law of North Korea's Prime Minister, who defected to South Korea in May, said that the North may already have five nuclear weapons and may build five more by the end of this year.

This threat now is compounded by increased uncertainty over North Korea's future course following the July 7 death of Kim Il-Sung, the North's first and only leader for the last 46 years. Kim Il Sung's designated successor is his son Kim Jong-Il, 52. The younger Kim is untested as a leader and the extent of his support among North Korea's military and Communist Party elite is uncertain. Kim Jong-Il may not rule North Korea for very long. This only makes it more urgent for Washington to seek an end to North Korea's nuclear threat. To this end Washington should seek to convey to the new North Korean leadership a very clear message: North Korea will be rewarded for ending its nuclear threat, but will face increased international pressure if it persists in building nuclear weapons.

Who Is Kim Jong-Il?

Revered in his country as the "Dear Leader" and the subject of a massive personality cult only slightly smaller than his father's, Kim Jong-Il is largely unknown. It is suspected that Kim Il-Sung designated Kim Jong-Il as his successor in 1972. Since then, the younger Kim has risen through the ranks of the North Korean Workers' (Communist) Party, and in April 1993 was made Chairman of the National Defense Committee, which controls all military and internal security forces.

Kim Jong-Il's personal habits raise genuine questions about his abilities to lead North Korea. A prominent South Korean movie producer who was kidnapped by Kim Jong-Il in 1978 described him as having a penchant for wild parties and an obsession with movies. More troubling, Kim Jong-Il also is suspected of helping to plan North Korean terrorist acts such as the 1983 bombing of the South Korean cabinet in Burma that killed 21 people and the 1987 bombing of a South Korea airliner that killed 115.

The speculation that Kim Jong-Il is a closet reformer comes mainly from South Korean and Western businessmen. The evidence they cite is a free trade zone designed to attract foreign investment established around the cities of Rajin and Sonbong. This zone, the businessmen note, was established by Kim Jong-Il. So far, however, only a Chinese trading company has announced plans to invest in this zone. No Western companies have invested there.

Kim Il-Sung's Legacy

Kim's free trade zone did not attract much foreign participation because his father had built North Korea into one of the most tightly controlled and oppressive societies of this century. In recent years, Kim Il-Sung rebuffed South Korean, Chinese, and other Western attempts to crack open North Korea's closed society through increased trade and personal contacts. The elder Kim most likely feared that such an opening to the West might generate internal opposition to his regime that would lead to its collapse, as happened in Eastern Europe. However, former Assistant Secretary of State Gaston Sigur notes, "The trends are clearly in the way of opening" to the West. Kim Jong-Il will sorely need Western trade and investment as his economy cannot sustain his people. Per capita gross domestic product is estimated to be below \$1,000 per year; because of widespread food shortages, North Koreans are exhorted to eat only two meals a day.

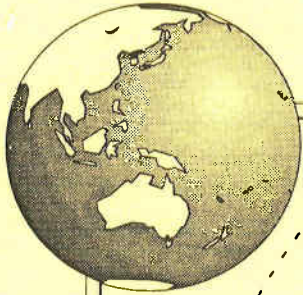
North Korea's economic poverty comes mainly from Kim Il-Sung's excessive diversion of North Korean resources to the military. At 1.1 million men, North Korea's military is the world's fourth largest. North Korea's armed forces are designed for one purpose: to reunify Korea by force. Any attempt by Kim Jong-Il to reduce the size of the armed forces would put him at odds with the politically powerful military.

Kim Il-Sung also built a large nuclear weapons research program. In fact, North Korea already is suspected of having produced enough plutonium to build two nuclear weapons. The defector Kang Myong-do, however, said the North could build up to ten bombs in the near future. In mid-May, North Korea extracted 8,000 fuel rods from a small 5-megawatt nuclear reactor. These could be "cool" enough to begin reprocessing by early Fall and yield enough plutonium to build the additional bombs mentioned by the defector. Kang says North Korea wants to use its nuclear weapons to obtain negotiated concessions from the West. But there also is the danger that North Korea could sell nuclear weapons to radical states in the Middle East, like Iran.

America's Priorities With Kim Jong-Il

As in dealing with his father, America's first priority with Kim Jong-Il should be the peaceful termination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Pyongyang has said it will participate in a third round of U.S.-North Korean high-level negotiations that was postponed after Kim Il-Sung's death. When these talks begin, on August 5, Washington should clearly tell Pyongyang that it will be welcomed into the community of nations once it ends its nuclear weapons program and surrenders all nuclear weapons materials; it will gain diplomatic recognition, increased trade, and help in building nuclear reactors that produce electrical power but much less plutonium.

If Pyongyang refuses, however, Washington will increase economic and political pressure on North Korea. Washington's near-term goal should be to obtain effective control of the 8,000 nuclear fuel rods withdrawn from the 5-megawatt reactor. Former U.S. Ambassador to Seoul James Lilley told The Heritage Foundation on July 26 that "this is the acid test" of North Korean sincerity on the nuclear issue. Pyongyang further should be warned that reprocessing those fuel rods will cause Washington to seek immediate economic and political sanctions. It would be appropriate for President Clinton to dispatch a high-level envoy to convey to Kim Jong-Il America's determination to end North Korea's nuclear threat. In the meantime, to emphasize its concern and to deter any possible North Korean aggression, Washington should send additional combat aircraft and naval forces to Northeast Asia.



Kim Jong-Il's Missile Force: A Growing Threat

Looking Toward Reunification

America's long-term priority is to facilitate a peaceful reunification of the Korean nation under a democratic government. Like the former communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, North Korea's communist system eventually will die. It is important, however, that the endgame be managed so that North Korea does not present South Korea with an uncontrollable burden. Drawing North Korea into a wider web of trade relationships—after it ends its nuclear weapons program—would help accomplish this goal.

However, a totalitarian regime in its terminal phase also can be very dangerous. Kim Il-Sung repeatedly pledged that he would reunify Korea under his communist dictatorship before he died. America's steadfast support for South Korea denied Kim his dream. America must continue to strengthen its military position in South Korea and Japan to deter Kim Jong-Il from thinking that he can fulfill his father's dream of ruling all of Korea.

Richard D. Fisher
Senior Policy Analyst