

WebMemo



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Planning for a North Korea without Kim Jong-il

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Rumors that Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke have triggered concerns over the ramifications of instability and regime change in North Korea, particularly in regards to that nation's arsenal of nuclear weapons. Over the years, there have been scores of rumors regarding Kim, including illness, incapacitation, coup, assassination, and even death.

Subsequently, jaded Korea watchers view such reports with skepticism. But one day the rumors will be true, and the most recent report could certainly be the one. For that reason, it is important to carefully and dispassionately think through all that Kim's departure from power might mean.

Of course, the demise of Kim's regime would present an enormous opportunity to achieve peace, security, and freedom on the Korean Peninsula. But as much as the peninsula—and the world, for that matter—stands to gain, the opportunity comes with a number of difficult, dangerous problems.

Kim's sudden departure would raise alarms over the transfer of power, since no formal succession plan has been announced. There is the potential for a power struggle among challengers to the throne, which could lead to instability. U.S. policy options are limited to contingency planning for scenarios that run the gamut from further delays in the six-party talks to regime collapse and implosion that draws South Korean or Chinese military units into North Korea to stabilize the situation. U.S.–South Korean contingency planning withered under previous President Roh Moo-hyun and may not have yet recovered under the new administration in Seoul.

Latest Round of Kim Jong-il Rumors. A confluence of rumors suggests Kim Jong-il may have suffered a stroke in August leading to some loss of physical capabilities. Considered individually, none of these rumors are definitive. But when measured collectively, they have been sufficient to cause South Korea to convene an emergency meeting of its National Security Council. The South Korean National Intelligence Service told legislators that Kim suffered a cerebral hemorrhage but “is recoverable and able to control the situation, and that North Korea is not in a power vacuum.”¹

Kim has not been seen in public for several weeks and was conspicuously absent from a major event celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of North Korea. The North Korean leader had been at the 50th and 55th anniversary celebrations, and the 60th anniversary is considered particularly auspicious in Asian cultures. A team of Chinese doctors reportedly traveled to North Korea to treat a senior North Korean official, and a South Korean diplomat reported that Kim collapsed in late August.

It should be noted that previous rumors include Chinese intelligence “confirming” Kim had been assassinated two months ago. In 2007, a team of German doctors visited Pyongyang ostensibly to

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treat Kim after a heart attack, only to have the leader appear on a routine inspection trip the following day. Kim was later reported to be unable to walk more than 30 steps without assistance, but he appeared healthy during the October 2007 inter-Korean summit, where he denied rumors of his poor health. Several years ago, Chinese doctors went to North Korea to treat a senior official, assumed to be Kim Jong-il, but later determined to be an ailing distinguished general.

No Succession Plan. There has been no announced succession plan, though expectations are that Kim will try to anoint one of his three sons. Kim's first son, Kim Jong-nam, was disgraced and sent into exile after being arrested for sneaking into Japan on a forged passport. There have been indications that the second son, Kim Jong-chol, may be being groomed for leadership similar to the lengthy process that preceded Kim Jong-il's own ascension to power. The third son is seen as too young to assume power. There is also speculation that Kim's brother-in-law, Chang Sang-taek, could be anointed or that there would be a collective leadership of military and Communist Party officials.

There would be a greater likelihood of an orderly transfer of power if a plan had been disseminated internally and had been underway for some time prior to Kim's passing from the scene. Similarly, if Kim was ill but still functioning, he could ensure that any potential rivals were kept at bay until his successor had gained sufficient influence on his own. Conversely, a sudden incapacitation or death in the absence of a formal plan could trigger dire, though less probable, scenarios.

For instance, competing rivals could appeal to military units for support, leading to concern over control of North Korea's nuclear weapons. A power vacuum or extensive unrest could lead Seoul or Beijing to consider intervening to protect the North Korean populace or their own interests. In 2002, Beijing inflamed suspicions in both Koreas when it claimed the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo as having been historically Chinese. China may have

been acting defensively to lay the legal groundwork to prevent a reunified Korea from claiming the ethnically Korean portion of northeast China as part of a "greater Korea." Koreans, conversely, feared that China had an offensive strategy to justify seizing North Korea after the collapse of the Kim regime.

No Impact on Nuclear Negotiations. Kim's departure from power will have little impact—if any—on the already deadlocked six-party talks. North Korea refuses to accept international standards of verification as called for in U.N. Resolution 1718, let alone adhere to Pyongyang's own September 2005 agreement to return "at an early date" to compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency verification safeguards. Pyongyang is seeking to minimize the intrusiveness of any inspection requirements, as it did in the 1994 Agreed Framework.

The magnitude of the dispute between the U.S. and North Korea over the verification protocol will make it more difficult for diplomats to continue papering over differences. The Bush Administration is constrained in its ability to again capitulate to North Korean demands in light of rising criticism regarding its perceived over-eagerness to reach an agreement and secure a policy legacy. As such, there is declining potential for a breakthrough during the waning months of the Bush Administration.

New Leader, Old Policies. If Kim Jong-il were replaced, the new leader would most likely pursue the same policies. The next leader would have less of a power base than Kim and would be more reliant on support from senior party and military leaders who are overwhelmingly nationalist and resistant to change. He would have to base his own legitimacy on maintaining the legacy of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il by continuing their policies.

There is little evidence of a "reformer faction" that advocates bold economic reform, opening the country to outside influence, reducing the regime's bellicose rhetoric and brinkmanship tactics, or abandoning its nuclear weapons programs. North Korea has perpetuated the image of factional in-

1. Jae-soon Chang, "S. Korea: N. Korea's Kim recovering from surgery," Associated Press, September 10, 2008, at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5i-7J8W3U3hGqe6cckzwh0tmHJRbAD933ROL80> (September 11, 2008).

fighting between “engagers” and “hardliners” as a negotiating tool to elicit additional benefits.

Irrespective of the accuracy of the current rumors, they underscore the need for thorough preparation for the inevitable leadership change in North Korea. The U.S. must first ensure it has prepared diplomatic, economic, and military responses to the range of potential scenarios that would ensue from a regime collapse in Pyongyang. The Bush Administration must press Seoul to complete nego-

tiations on Concept Plan 5029, which President Roh derailed. Luckily, the new Lee Myung-bak administration is far more amenable to close bilateral ties than its predecessor. Washington should augment trilateral coordination with both Seoul and Tokyo as well as confer with Beijing to prevent miscalculation during a North Korean crisis.

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