

Background

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New Leaders, Old Dangers: What North Korean Succession Means for the U.S.

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Abstract: *North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il's faltering health has raised concerns about regime stability. Succession rumors have been swirling for years, with Kim's third son, Jong-eun, currently rumored to be Kim's favored choice. But regardless of whether leadership stays in the family or is wrested away by a challenger, a new North Korean leader is likely to keep in place the same belligerent policies—toward South Korea, toward China and Japan, and toward the U.S. If succession does not go smoothly, and if the North Korean regime were to collapse, the ensuing chaos would require immediate action by the U.S. and its Asian allies to restore stability, provide humanitarian relief, and search for and prevent the distribution of WMDs.*

International attention has been focused on North Korea's nuclear weapons program, which endangers U.S. national interests, the safety of critical U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, and peace and stability in Asia. Washington must continue to use a combination of diplomatic pressure and highly conditional negotiations to induce Pyongyang to abide by its denuclearization pledges, as well as to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Yet there is another North Korean threat for which Washington must prepare: instability in the country's leadership. The planned succession from the ailing Kim Jong-il to his third son faces many challenges and may not be successful. Because the young son lacks the *gravitas* of his father, there is the potential for a

Talking Points

- The planned North Korean leadership succession from the ailing Kim Jong-il to his third son, Jong-eun, may fail, raising the potential for regime instability. Recent social unrest in North Korea reflects a greater public willingness to rebel against the dictatorship.
- A failed succession could result in regime collapse, leading to North Korea's loss of control of its nuclear weapons, greater risk of rogue elements selling WMDs to rogue governments and terrorist groups, fighting among competing factions, economic turmoil, and humanitarian disaster.
- Under such circumstances, China or South Korea might feel compelled to send troops into North Korea to stabilize the country, raising the potential for miscalculation and armed confrontation.
- Regardless of who the next North Korean leader is, he is likely to maintain the regime's belligerent policies toward the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.

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power struggle among challengers within the senior party and military leadership.

The issue of succession is especially worrisome in view of recent indications that deteriorating economic conditions, exacerbated by the tightening noose of international sanctions, and rising civil unrest in response to draconian attacks against free-market activity could create a tinderbox of instability.

If the situation became so dire as to bring about the collapse of the regime, it could lead to North Korea's loss of control over its nuclear weapons, greater risk of rogue elements selling weapons of mass destruction to other rogue governments and terrorist groups, fighting among competing factions, economic turmoil, and humanitarian disaster. Under such circumstances, China or South Korea might feel compelled to send troops into North Korea to stabilize the country, raising the potential for miscalculation and armed confrontation.

Moreover, even a smooth leadership transition would put diplomatic efforts to induce North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons on hold. It is unlikely that Pyongyang would trade away its nuclear weapons when it feels weakened by leadership transition.

The North Korean regime has shown remarkable resilience over the past 15 years. However, there is now a growing sense that a combination of stresses is pushing Pyongyang closer to the tipping point.

The North Korean regime has shown remarkable resilience over the past 15 years, belying repeated predictions of its imminent demise. However, there is now a growing sense that a combination of stresses is pushing Pyongyang closer to the tipping point. Like storm clouds on the horizon, the implications of leadership transition are significant and unpredictable.

Kim's sudden death or incapacitation could trigger events culminating in a cataclysmic security challenge for the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The potential for turmoil in a nation with nuclear weapons must therefore be a top priority for the U.S. and its allies. The Obama Administration should develop military, political, and economic contingency plans for a wide range of scenarios. The U.S. should integrate its plans with those of South Korea and Japan and initiate discussions with China and Russia. Discussions among scholars from these countries ("track two" dialogues) could be used to augment government efforts.

Kim Jong-il's Ill Health

In August 2008, Kim Jong-il suffered one or two strokes, leading to his absence from public view for months. Later in 2008, the North Korean government released photos of Kim that purportedly showed him to be in good health, but these pictures were subsequently exposed as doctored. Kim eventually recovered but appears frail and emaciated.

Initial judgments about Kim's health have been reassessed as a result of Kim's August 2009 meetings with former President Bill Clinton and Hyundai Chairwoman Hyun Jung-eun, during which the North Korean leader was described as robust and in full control of his faculties, but there are continuing concerns about Kim's health, and a sudden collapse is possible at any time. Life expectancy for stroke victims is low, particularly for someone like Kim, who has resumed smoking and drinking.

Kim Jong-il continues to suffer from chronic health problems, including diabetes, kidney and heart problems, and high blood pressure. He reportedly receives regular dialysis, particularly before meetings with foreign leaders, so that he can appear to be in good health.¹ In December 2009, there were reports that Kim remained weak and could work only every other day.² Contrary to rumors, he likely does not have pancreatic cancer.

1. "Kim Jong-il Undergoing Regular Kidney Dialysis," *The Chosun Ilbo*, February 1, 2010.

2. "Report: NKorean Leader Kim's Health Worsens," Associated Press, December 16, 2009, at http://www2.wnct.com/nct/news/world/article/report_nkorean_leader_kims_health_worsens/85789 (March 30, 2010).

Third Time's the Charm?

It has long been expected that Kim Jong-il would implement a hereditary succession plan as his own father had done. The North Korean constitution has no formal provisions for leadership succession.

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It was predicted initially that Kim Jong-nam, Kim's first son, would be selected as the next leader, but Jong-nam was perceived as having eliminated himself from contention after his arrest for sneaking into Japan on a false Dominican passport, ostensibly to visit Disneyland Tokyo. However, because he is an illegitimate son, Jong-nam was never a viable candidate:

Because the Confucian culture and traditions were still strong in North Korea at the time, Kim Il-sung could not publicly accept [Kim Jong-nam's mother] into North Korea's most prestigious family because she had been married to another man and was five years older than [Kim Jong-il].³

Jong-nam lost additional favor after the births of his half-brothers Kim Jong-chol and Kim Jong-eun, who were subsequently more favored by Kim Jong-il. After their births, Jong-nam was largely abandoned by Kim Jong-il.

Expectations then shifted to Kim Jong-chol, Kim Jong-il's second son. Indeed, from 2004 to 2006, there were many rumors "confirming" that Jong-chol had been formally anointed as the next leader. Reports included sightings of lapel pins bearing dual images of Kim Jong-il and Jong-chol. There were also indications that Jong-chol's mother was

being glorified, as had occurred with Kim Jong-il's mother during his own accession to power.

In 2005, European policymakers were advised to prepare contingency plans for "sudden change" in North Korea. The Japanese Public Security Intelligence Agency warned of a potential "feud or confrontation" arising from a succession struggle. Jong-chol had reportedly been assigned to a department within the Korean Workers Party in which Kim Jong-il had served during his own accession. Kim Jong-chol also was reported to have attended meetings with his father and visiting Chinese officials, including President Hu Jintao. Yet Jong-chol's star also faded in favor of his younger brother, Kim Jong-eun's.⁴

During 2009, indicators began to appear that Kim Jong-eun was in the process of being anointed instead to succeed his father. Initial reports were cryptic, based on a rumored North Korean telegram sent to overseas missions designating Jong-eun as the next leader. Media reports, denied by Beijing, asserted that Kim Jong-eun had secretly traveled to China to meet with President Hu Jintao.

Jong-eun is reported to have become the head of both the State Security Department and the Department of Organization and Guidance of the Korea Workers Party. In June 2009, South Korean intelligence reported that North Korea had informed the army, the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, and its embassies that Jong-eun had been designated as Kim Jong-il's successor. North Korean embassies signaled congratulatory messages to Pyongyang in which they pledged their allegiance to Jong-eun as the next supreme leader.⁵

Propaganda posters appeared in North Korea praising Jong-eun as a "genius of military strategy with thorough knowledge of modern military science and technology."⁶ Jong-eun was praised as

3. Cheong Seong-chang, "Kim Jong-il's Illness and Prospects for Post-Kim Leadership," *East Asia Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Winter 2008), p. 13.

4. Also transliterated as Kim Jong-un.

5. "South Korean Spy Agency Confirms North Korean Leader's Third Son as Successor," Kuwait News Agency, June 12, 2009, and James Rosen, "U.S. Intelligence Confirms Kim Jong-il's Son to Inherit North Korean Dictatorship," FOXNews.com, June 12, 2009, at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/06/12/intelligence-confirms-kim-jong-ils-son-inherit-north-korean-dictatorship> (March 28, 2010).

“succeeding to the lineage of Mangyondae and Mt. Baekdu” (the birthplaces of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il).⁷ Internal propaganda credited Jong-eun for North Korea’s May 2009 nuclear test and praised his “brilliant strategy and foresight” for maneuvering former President Clinton to apologize in August 2009 for two U.S. journalists who had trespassed into North Korea.⁸

In February 2010, North Korean embassies were directed to “firmly establish the system for the sole leadership of Kim Jong-eun.” The Free North Korea Radio, run by North Korean defectors in Seoul, also reported that Kim Jong-eun’s birthday, January 8, had been designated a national holiday.⁹

Succession Not the Reason for North Korean Belligerence

Some analysts have tried to downplay North Korea’s belligerent behavior¹⁰ in 2009 as the result of Kim Jong-il’s having to purchase hard-liners’ support for Jong-eun as his successor. This school of thought asserts that Pyongyang would return to the Six Party Talks negotiations and resume denuclearization once the leadership transition gained sufficient support from the military and security services.

Similarly, describing the ongoing succession process as a “crisis” or “struggle” also provides an excuse for North Korean hostility, provocation, and violations of denuclearization agreements and U.N. resolutions. Some observers speculate that Pyongyang’s rejection of dialogue with the Obama Administration and repeated violations of international agreements are “a show of strength to internal rivals, shoring up the succession of his dynasty.”¹¹

But there has been no evidence that there is opposition to Kim’s planned succession or that the aggressive North Korean policy is due to placating

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any factions. It is important to remember that North Korea conducted similar long-range missile and nuclear tests in 2006 before any rumored succession process.

There is little evidence of a faction that advocates bold economic reform and opening the country to outside influence, reducing the regime’s bellicose rhetoric and brinkmanship tactics, or abandoning its nuclear weapons programs. In classic “good cop, bad cop” strategy, North Korea has long perpetuated the image of factional infighting between “engagers” and “hardliners” as a negotiating tool to elicit additional benefits. Rather, it is a division of roles with all playing their part in order to gain maximum diplomatic and economic benefits. In the words of a Korean adage, “the same animal has sharp claws and soft fur.”

Kim’s failing health may be a factor, though not the only one, for the 2009 provocations. The North Korean government has demonstrated that when it feels militarily and politically weak, it responds with bellicose rhetoric and behavior.

Kim Jong-il’s health problems did not alter North Korea’s long-standing objective to become a nuclear weapons state; they merely accelerated the pace at which Pyongyang seeks to achieve that goal. Kim now appears more driven to achieve fully operational nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them before his death or the transfer of power to a successor. Doing so would enable North Korea to

6. “Succession Groundwork Underway in North Korea,” *The Korea Herald*, October 28, 2009.

7. “Why North Korean Regime Succession Is a Delicate Matter,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, September 28, 2009.

8. “N. Korea Praises Leader’s Heir Apparent for Clinton Trip,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, August 10, 2009, at http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/08/10/2009081000661.html (March 28, 2010).

9. “Missions of North Tipped to Successor,” *The JoongAng Ilbo*, February 2, 2010.

10. In 2009, North Korea conducted several missile tests and a nuclear test; abrogated the Korean War armistice; rescinded all bilateral agreements with South Korea; threatened war against the U.S., South Korea, and Japan several times; threatened civilian airliners; and threatened to augment its nuclear weapons arsenal.

11. Christian Oliver, “N Korea Responds to UN with Nuclear Threats,” *Financial Times*, June 13, 2009.

confront its opponents with a stronger hand during the potentially fragile time of a succession. Pyongyang's eagerness to conduct a nuclear test so quickly after its long-range missile launch demonstrated that it had abandoned the façade of negotiations and was no longer interested in diplomatic entreaties.

Pyongyang has announced that it intends to become a "powerful nation" by 2012, the 100th and 70th anniversaries of Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jong-il's births, respectively, a possible reference to achieving formal recognition as a nuclear weapons state.

Succession on Hold? During the summer of 2009, there were indications that the succession process had been postponed. The Party Central Committee's Propaganda and Agitation Department directed that provincial party organizations cease issuing domestic propaganda extolling Kim Jong-eun. Pyongyang issued an internal decree that prohibited the singing of a song praising Kim Jong-eun and ordered the removal of its lyrics from workplaces where they had been posted.

The North Korean government ordered all officials to refrain from discussing the planned succession. Kim Jong-nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, told Kyodo News Service that foreign media reports on a succession were "groundless." "We haven't even had discussion on such an issue in our country," he added.¹²

The reasons for the policy reversal on the leadership succession remained uncertain. Some U.S. and South Korean experts speculated that Kim Jong-il's health had improved sufficiently to reduce the urgency of a rapid succession plan. Kim might have felt that, under the circumstances, the propaganda had become excessive and could even lead to a diminution of his own authority. This would be similar to 2005, when Kim Jong-il issued an edict banning party executives and the general populace from so much as discussing leadership succession, claiming that "our enemies are backbiting us by speculating about our country's future leadership and a father-to-son succession."¹³

There were also some indications that the planned Jong-eun succession had run into trouble, including suggestions that Jong-eun had overstepped his authority. A party official told a defector organization that Jong-eun had incurred his father's wrath by "forcibly removing devoted officials and causing factionalism by planting his own forces."¹⁴

Regime Triggers Civil Unrest. In late 2009, North Korea launched another attack on underground free-market activity. In November, Pyongyang declared a 100-to-1 downward revaluation of the won, the North Korean currency, with strict limits on the amount of cash that could be exchanged for foreign currencies. Each household was allowed a single week to exchange a maximum of 100,000 won (approximately \$200), wiping out life savings overnight.

In December, Pyongyang banned the use of any foreign currency. The regime warned that use or possession of foreign currency would entail severe punishment. Businesses could withdraw foreign currency from banks only with government permission. In January 2010, North Korea announced it would close down all unofficial markets in major cities, to be replaced by farmers markets that would be allowed to operate only once every 10 days. The government also mandated operating rules for the farmers markets, as well as a list of items that could be sold.

These moves were billed as inflation controls but in reality were an aggressive attempt to reassert state control of the economy, stamp out unofficial market activity, and ferret out those who had profited from the underground economy. Since the mid-1990s, the government had turned a blind eye to entrepreneurial black markets, allowing them to flourish and enabling the North Korean public to augment the failed government food distribution system. Though allowing such activity, the regime saw it as a threat and periodically cracked down on free-market activity. In 2004, the regime initiated a campaign to rescind its minimal economic liberal-

12. "Propaganda Glorifies North Korean Leader in Waiting," *The Korea Herald*, September 28, 2009.

13. "Kim Jong-il Loses Patience with Successor Chatter," *The Chosun Ilbo*, December 12, 2005.

14. Moon Sung-hwee, "Jong Woon Propaganda Comes to a Halt," *Daily NK*, August 27, 2009.

ization reforms of 2002 and re-enforce socialist economic policies.

The crackdown on free-market activity in 2009 led to runaway inflation, a return of food shortages, and some civilian protests and riots. The result “has been a literal disintegration of the market, as traders, intimidated by the changing rules of the game, withheld supply, reportedly forcing some citizens to resort to barter.”¹⁵

The regime was able to reassert control after the disturbances. However, the public protests forced it into a rare policy retreat. Pyongyang raised the original draconian limits on the amount of won that could be exchanged for foreign currency. The regime also backtracked on the market restrictions and rescinded the ban on foreign currency.

A diplomat in Beijing reported that “North Korean officials are busy blaming each other for the failed currency reform” and that “North Korea hoped to stabilize prices through the currency reform and then credit the achievement to Kim Jong-il’s third son and heir apparent Jong-eun to consolidate his grip on power.”¹⁶ When the ploy became an obvious failure, Pyongyang fired Pak Nam-gi, the Korean Workers Party Director of Finance, as a scapegoat.

The extent of the policy debacle is revealed by North Korean Prime Minister Kim Jong-il’s rare apology to a meeting of village chiefs and party officials. During the hour-long apology, Kim reportedly stated, “I sincerely apologize for having caused great pain to the people by recklessly enforcing the latest currency reform without making sufficient preparations or considering the circumstances.”¹⁷

Implications for Succession Stability

Protests and riots in response to the currency revaluation were strong enough to cause a policy reversal by the regime but not indicative of orga-

nized systemic dissent that threatened regime stability. Moreover, the incidents appeared to have been directed specifically against the security services implementing the economic edicts rather than against the regime itself. That said, this past February, North Korea’s security and counterintelligence services issued a rare joint warning of a massive crackdown and retaliation against subversive activities, which were seen as rising beyond the danger level.¹⁸

North Korea’s economic situation remains precarious, with little likelihood of improvement.

The security services were able to quell the protests, but North Korea’s economic situation remains precarious, with little likelihood of improvement. Having succeeded in getting the government to reverse its policies, the populace may be encouraged to foment additional uprisings.

Although the policy reversal will allow private markets to remain an important economic safety valve, continuing systemic failures leave North Korea unable to feed itself and heavily reliant on foreign aid. This long-standing problem is exacerbated by increasing cash flow problems caused by the imposition of punitive U.N. sanctions and the closing of several previous avenues for cash and aid:

- Greater willingness by the international community to intercept arms shipments in violation of U.N. resolutions;
- Less willingness on the part of the U.S. and South Korea to offer unconditional economic and diplomatic benefits despite lack of progress in denuclearization negotiations;
- South Korea’s refusal to reinstate the Kumgansan tourist program after the shooting of a South Korean tourist by the North Korean military; and

15. Marcus Noland, “Currency Reform May Unsettle North Korean Leadership,” BBC, February 5, 2010, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8500017.stm> (March 30, 2010).

16. “N.Korean Finance Chief Sacked Over Currency Debacle,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, February 3, 2010, at http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/02/03/2010020300585.html (March 28, 2010).

17. “N.Korea Climbs Down Over Anti-Market Reforms,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, February 11, 2010, at http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/02/11/2010021100735.html (March 28, 2010).

18. “Signs of Unrest,” *The Korea Herald*, February 16, 2010.

- Dwindling international aid in response to Pyongyang's refusal to accept global monitoring standards.

North Korea's increasing economic isolation leaves the country less capable of responding to an economic downturn, increasing the potential for

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crisis. A regime concurrently undergoing a leadership succession would be weaker, more brittle, and less resilient, increasing the potential for national instability.

New Leader, Old Policies

After Kim Jong-il is replaced, the new leader is likely to continue the same policies. Due to Kim's cult of personality, the next leader would have less of a power base 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 nationalist and military-based policies.

The next leader may well pursue a policy that is even more hard-line than Kim Jong-il's. To secure his hold on power, he may have to instigate a crisis in order to generate a "rally around the flag effect." Propaganda would highlight the supposed need for increased vigilance against attempts by outside powers to take advantage of North Korea's weakness during a leadership transition. There would be calls to heighten the country's defenses against the U.S.

and South Korea and increase rather than abandon Pyongyang's nuclear weapons arsenal. Such a tumultuous time, the government would argue, would negate any potential for implementing any economic or political reform that could risk regime instability. The new leader would attempt to reassure the senior leadership that his policies do not pose a risk to regime stability and, by extension, their livelihoods and lives.

A Succession Plan Does Not Guarantee Success. All power in North Korea resides in Kim Jong-il. To maintain control and to minimize the chances for alternative power bases to develop, Kim has put state officials and government organizations in competition with each other, has created overlapping areas of responsibility, and has the security services investigating members of the elite as well as each other.

Scenarios for change in North Korea have long been a staple for analysis and debate, both within the U.S. intelligence community and among outside

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experts.¹⁹ The circumstances of the transition will be critical, depending particularly on whether it is a sudden event or a drawn-out process. Although there are many permutations, scenarios usually coalesce around three principal outcomes:

- A successful transfer of power (to an individual or a collective);
- A disputed succession; or
- A failed succession and regime collapse.²⁰

19. The author recommends several excellent succession studies for review, including Paul Stares and Joel Wit, "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea," Council on Foreign Relations, January 2009; Bruce Bechtol, "The North Korean Regime Succession Process and Its Implications for Regional Security," American Enterprise Institute, April 2007; Ken E. Gause, "Future North Korean Crises: Scenarios and Signposts," The CNA Corporation, April 2009; and Andrew Scobell, "Projecting Pyongyang: The Future of North Korea's Kim Jong-il Regime," U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, April 2008.

20. These three outcomes have also been referred to as (1) managed succession, (2) contested succession, and (3) failed succession (Stares and Wit) and as (1) suspended animation (*status quo* of regime survival with no major policy changes), (2) soft landing (economic reform and moderate security policies), and (3) hard landing (regime collapse or overthrow) (Scobell).

Successful Succession. A North Korean leadership transition could be an orderly transfer of power if a formal plan were disseminated within the government and if Kim Jong-il were able to supervise the succession directly for some time before his death. If Kim were ill but still functioning, he could ensure that any potential rivals were kept at bay until his successor had gained sufficient standing on his own.

To facilitate the transfer of power to a successor, Kim Jong-il consolidated national power last year by expanding the power of the National Defense Commission (NDC). The 12th Supreme People's Assembly of April 2009 amended the North Korean constitution to expand the NDC's authority from overseeing military and security matters to overseeing the entire government. By concentrating all power in the NDC, Kim has created a power base allowing a quick, orderly, legal transfer of authority.

The new constitution designates the NDC chairman as supreme leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, responsible for overseeing the national economy, appointing and dismissing major military figures, ratifying or abolishing treaties, and wielding the authority to declare a state of emergency or war.²¹

A "successful" succession means the continuation of a vicious dictatorship that subjugates its population, threatens its neighbors, and pursues nuclear weapons for coercive diplomacy.

The power of the NDC was further increased by Kim to give it control of the espionage and external affairs departments, which had previously been overseen by the Korea Workers Party. The NDC membership was expanded to include Chang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law, and members of the security agencies.

A "successful" succession, however, means the continuation of a vicious dictatorship that subjugates its population, threatens its neighbors, and pursues nuclear weapons for coercive diplomacy.

The North Korean tiger would continue to have fangs of nuclear, biological, chemical, and conventional weapons. The regional security balance would be an increasingly dangerous *status quo* as North Korea refines its nuclear and missile delivery capabilities.

Disputed Succession. Like a copy of a copy, Kim Jong-eun is a pale reflection of his father and grandfather. He has not had the decades of grooming and securing of a power base that Jong-il enjoyed before assuming control from his own father. Kim Il-sung had delegated authority for North Korea's security services and nuclear weapons programs to Kim Jong-il years before he died. During the last years of his father's life, Kim Jong-il was, for all intents and purposes, the one running the country.

Jong-eun is only in his late twenties, with little experience and few official positions or accomplishments. He lacks the *gravitas*, legitimacy, and power to run the government on his own. He is far weaker than Kim Jong-il and has had far less time to develop expertise, an independent power base, or a cult of personality.

The North Korean elite has a vested interest in maintaining the system and will assess Jong-eun's ability to protect its interests. The elite will balance a shared sense of external threat against fear of domestic instability from an inexperienced leader. The senior government leadership may assess Jong-eun's shortcomings as sufficient justification for contesting his succession. Elite resistance to Jong-eun's rule could manifest itself in outright opposition or in usurping his power and leaving him a mere figurehead.

The most critical member of the elite will be Chang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law. Chang heads the powerful Korea Workers Party department that controls the internal security agencies, police, and judiciary and was appointed in 2009 as a full member of the National Defense Commission. Chang could position himself as a supporter of, regent for, or challenger to Kim Jong-eun.

Failed Succession. Even if the regime succeeds in its initial transfer of power, fault lines could appear

21. Na Jeong-ju, "North Korean Constitution States Kim Jong-il as Leader," *The Korea Times*, September 28, 2009.

within the elite over time. Challengers to an announced successor would not become evident until after Kim Jong-il's death. The new leadership would endeavor to maintain regime cohesion, domestic stability, and influence over foreign nations, but even an initially successful succession could deteriorate into a power struggle and leadership vacuum.

Any challenge to a declared succession would come from other members of the elite. There is little chance for bottom-up change from a massive popular uprising. The populace is heavily indoctrinated and cowed by pervasive government monitoring and savage security services.

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Unlike in Communist Eastern Europe, there are no alternative power bases in North Korea. There are no organized opposition parties or dissident movements. Nor are there any charismatic alternative leaders, such as Poland's Lech Walesa or Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel, since in North Korea, any perceived challengers to the order are eliminated. North Korea also has no history of democracy or alternatives to the Kim dictatorship.

A failed succession could result either in collapse of the regime while the North Korean government remained functional or in collapse of the entire state. The succession could degenerate into rivals calling on military units for support, leading to armed clashes. Low-probability but high-impact scenarios would be a power vacuum; civil war among warring factions; or internal unrest extensive enough that it leads Beijing or Seoul to intervene, particularly if concern over control of North Korea's nuclear weapons arises. North Korea's neighbors might fear that the instability could create an "explosion" (aggressive actions toward South Korea or Japan) or an "implosion" (regime collapse).

China's Role in a North Korean Crisis

International response to a North Korean crisis would depend on the parameters of the situation. If the regime remained viable, the crisis would be seen as an internal situation in which Pyongyang might even call on China for assistance. If the Kim regime lost control of the government or a humanitarian crisis triggered instability, these circumstances would provide greater impetus for outside powers to intervene. South Korea would argue that it is the rightful inheritor of the Korean Peninsula, though Seoul would realize that a significant crisis would require U.S. military support as well as international aid and developmental assistance.

The critical question that overshadows any North Korean contingency planning is: How will Beijing respond? China has consistently valued stability—defined as maintenance of the North Korean state—over the inherent unpredictable risks of alternative scenarios, a case of "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't." Although developments in modern military warfare have reduced the importance of a buffer state to some degree, Beijing would still prefer a troublesome North Korean buffer to losing strategic defenses on its border.

In 2002, China inflamed suspicions in both Koreas when it claimed the ancient Korean kingdom of Koguryo as historically Chinese.²² Beijing may have been acting defensively to lay the legal groundwork to prevent a reunified Korea from

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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.

China has rebuffed repeated U.S. and South Korean entreaties to engage in crisis preparation.

22. From 37 B.C. to 688 A.D., the Koguryo region encompassed the northern half of the Korean Peninsula and substantial areas north of the Yalu River, an area that is now part of China's northeast provinces.

U.S., Korean, and Japanese scholars report that Chinese academics have been equally reticent to discuss the topic even on a Track 2 level. China is concerned that:

[A]ny open discussion of contingency planning would undermine the authority of the current [North Korean] leadership and possibly spark a crisis of confidence, perhaps amongst key constituencies such as the Korea People's Army, resulting in the regime-changing crisis that [Beijing is] actively seeking to avoid.²³

China also fears that pressuring North Korea would lead to a loss of the influence, limited as it is, that Beijing has over Pyongyang.

Beijing's strategic objectives toward North Korea have been "protecting China's military-strategic environment; maintaining security and stability along [its border]; and sustaining economic development and political stability in the three northeastern provinces that border North Korea."²⁴ As a result, China would resist any perceived international efforts to precipitate a crisis or bring about regime change in North Korea.

During the early stages of a North Korean leadership crisis, China would try to contain the situation by prolonging the *status quo* and opposing any foreign intervention, including through its position on the U.N. Security Council. Beijing would take steps to ameliorate a humanitarian crisis in North Korea in order to reduce the likelihood of refugee flow, preventing any spillover effect into China's northeast provinces.

Beijing would prefer that any humanitarian assistance be provided to refugees while they remain in North Korea. The Chinese military could establish a control zone, either in China or, potentially, even in North Korea. The latter would provoke strong criticism from the U.S. and South Korea and, counter to Chinese interests, provide a pretext for U.S. and South Korean intervention.

Beijing's calculation of factors that would precipitate its own intervention remains a mystery. China understands that the North Korean government and populace would not welcome Chinese intervention, given historical animosities. Beijing would

U.S. experts' discussions with Chinese academics indicate that Beijing has contingency plans for three military intervention missions in North Korea.

therefore have to balance its intervention in order to secure an unstable country on its border with the realization that a Chinese military presence could not be permanent.

However, Beijing would intervene directly if it deemed the situation to be out of control and saw itself forced to restore stability and political order. U.S. experts' discussions with Chinese academics indicate that Beijing has contingency plans for three military intervention missions in North Korea:

- Humanitarian missions (refugee aid or natural disaster response);
- Peacekeeping or "order keeping" missions such as serving as civil police; and
- "Environmental control" to clean up nuclear contamination resulting from a strike on North Korean nuclear facilities near the Chinese border or to secure loose North Korean nuclear weapons or fissile material.²⁵

Beijing might prefer that any Chinese military intervention be done with U.N. authorization, but it is not known whether it would provide troops to a multilateral peacekeeping operation or demand sole authority over a zone of responsibility along its border with North Korea. South Korea would fear the latter option as legitimizing Chinese sovereignty over part of North Korea and hindering eventual Korean unification.²⁶ Chinese intervention would likely be undertaken to stabilize the situation and

23. Henry Shinn, "Contingency Plans Needed for N.K. Upheaval," *The Korea Herald*, August 13, 2009, at http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/NEWKHSITE/data/html_dir/2009/08/13/200908130073.asp (March 28, 2010).

24. Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor," Joint Report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and U.S. Institute of Peace, January 3, 2008, p. 3.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

restore a sovereign North Korean state in order to prevent Korean reunification.

If a North Korean collapse was inevitable, Beijing would want to ensure a seat at the negotiating table so that its concerns are addressed. Even if there were no chance of restoring North Korea, the Chinese would insist that an expanded South Korea would have to provide guarantees (e.g., no U.S. forces north of the 38th parallel) in order to get Chinese troops to leave the Korean Peninsula.

During a North Korean succession crisis, China, the U.S., and South Korea may also find themselves at odds over whether to seize North Korean nuclear weapons and, if so, which country should send its military. U.S. officials have affirmed that potential clashes between Chinese forces and U.S. or South Korean forces during a North Korean crisis are a “worst case scenario that brings the worst case fears.”²⁷

Contingency Plans. The U.S. and South Korea have developed a contingency plan called Concept Plan (Conplan) 5029 to respond to peninsular crises other than a North Korean invasion of the South, which is covered by Operations Plan (Oplan) 5027. Conplan 5029 covers six scenarios: regime collapse, civil war sparked by a transition of power or a coup after Kim Jong-il’s death, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, a mass exodus of North Koreans, a massive natural disaster, and kidnapping of South Korean citizens.²⁸

U.S. and South Korean officials have privately commented that Conplan 5029 has been formalized into Oplan 5029—which would include formal delineation of military responsibilities in a crisis—but both the U.S. and South Korea publicly deny it because of South Korean concerns about possible North Korean reactions. Republic of Korea (ROK) Defense Ministry spokesman Won Tae-jae stated

that “we have received no such proposal and we are therefore not considering anything.” Won also commented that “we have yet to hear that [Oplan 5029] has been completed.”²⁹ Pyongyang responded in February to reports of Oplan 5029’s reported completion by declaring a “sacred war” against Seoul.

The plan focuses predominantly on military requirements. “While the US–ROK military plans have been updated, they exist in a political and diplomatic vacuum.... In view of the multiple and complex contingencies that could transpire in North Korea, a whole-of-government approach seems

Contingency plans must go beyond military operations to include providing security for the populace, installing functional governments, providing food and medical assistance, and making the transition to economic redevelopment.

sadly lacking.”³⁰

Comprehensive interagency and government-to-government planning have lagged in recent months due both to nervousness that leaks of the plans will incite North Korean response and to a lack of focus and decisions by senior-level officials.

What the U.S. Should Do

To prepare itself as thoroughly as possible to deal with the chaos that could result from North Korean crises, the U.S. should take the following actions:

- **Expand military contingency plans to address diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian challenges.** As the aftermath of the U.S. military intervention in Iraq demonstrated, difficulties do not cease with the end of hostilities. Contingency plans must go beyond military operations to include providing security for the populace, installing functional governments, providing

26. Scott Snyder, “North Korean Instability: Prospects and Conditions for Chinese Intervention,” Asia Foundation, July 15, 2009.

27. Author interview with U.S. official, March 2010.

28. “South Korea, US Complete North Korean Contingency Play,” *The Chosun Ilbo*, November 2, 2009.

29. “Allies May Hold Drill for North Korean Emergency,” *The Korea Herald*, February 6, 2010.

30. James J. Przystup, “North Korea: Challenges, Interests, and Policy,” Institute for National Security Studies, National Defense University, *Strategic Forum* No. 250, November 2009, p. 6.

food and medical assistance, and making the transition to economic redevelopment. U.S. military emergency assistance after the massive February 2010 earthquake in Haiti demonstrates the extent of necessary services.

- **Adopt phased crisis contingency plans.** While military and security objectives will be a predominant focus in the initial stages of a crisis, later stages will be marked by a greater emphasis on humanitarian requirements, economic stabilization, and long-term developmental needs. Political decisions will be required on altering the legal status of North Korea, whether to establish refugee camps within North Korea or facilitate refugee movement to other countries, and whether to prosecute or provide amnesty for those who are accused of committing crimes against the North Korean people.
- **Engage in multilateral contingency planning to lay the foundation for effective crisis response.** The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should coordinate their national interests, desired end-state after a North Korean collapse, and trigger points for action. Deconflicting competing objectives and developing carefully prepared contingency plans will reduce misperceptions and miscalculations during a crisis.
- **Ensure that all relevant government agencies are involved in contingency planning.** A South Korean official privately commented that the Ministry of Defense had not shared its plans with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Washington should ensure that it is aware of all South Korean contingency plans in order to prevent competing objectives during a crisis. In the mid-1990s, the U.S. responded angrily to revelations that South Korea had unilateral attack plans for targets in North Korea of which Washington had been previously unaware.
- **Implement exercises to validate contingency plans and identify shortfalls.** South Korea has been hesitant to test Conplan 5029 out of concern about antagonizing Pyongyang. Washington should press Seoul to conduct comprehensive multi-agency exercises addressing a variety of North Korean crisis scenarios.
- **Assess military assets.** Estimates of the total number of ground forces required to respond to a North Korean crisis range from 115,000 to 460,000 troops, depending on whether they are operating in a permissive or contested environment.³¹ South Korea would provide the majority of military forces, but there are doubts about its ability to respond. Seoul has lagged in defense funding, raising the risk of capabilities shortfalls. Given the predicted need for extensive troops in responding to North Korean instability, South Korea should reassess its Defense Reform 2020 strategy that would reduce the number of ground forces significantly.
- **Review U.S. intelligence community collection assets and tasking priorities.** While intelligence requirements for Afghanistan, Iran, and global terrorism remain essential, the consequences of North Korean instability require sufficient priority to prevent an intelligence failure and strategic surprise. Identifying the location of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction is of paramount importance. Technical collection programs and human assets require a long time to develop, so planning should begin immediately. Questions about the aging constellation of U.S. intelligence satellites and their shortcomings in providing robust collection during crises should be addressed.
- **Press China for greater transparency on its contingency plans** and the degree to which it would cooperate with U.N. efforts. Washington should explain to Beijing that continued ambiguity could lead to potential military confrontation between the U.S., South Korea, and China during a crisis.
- **Support South Korea's predominant role in addressing a crisis on the Korean Peninsula while simultaneously addressing Chinese security interests.** Washington and Seoul should warn Beijing against military intervention in North Korea. At the same time, the U.S. should

31. Stares and Wit, "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea."

realize that disregarding Chinese interests, such as concerns over North Korean instability and resulting refugees, poses risks to achieving U.S. objectives in northeast Asia.

South Korea should take the lead in responding to a North Korean crisis while the U.S. plays a vital supporting role.

Seoul should promise Beijing that a unified Korea's northern border would remain the Yalu River, just as West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl reassured Europe and the Soviet Union that a reunified Germany's borders would not change. Washington could pledge that no U.S. forces will be permanently stationed north of the demilitarized zone and that U.S. military missions during a crisis would be limited to small-unit seizure of WMD and logistical support to South Korean forces.

- **Delineate country and multilateral responsibilities.** South Korea should take the lead in responding to a North Korean crisis while the U.S. plays a vital supporting role. This arrangement would be consistent with the evolving nature of the bilateral alliance. Responding to a North Korean crisis will also require logistical

and economic support from other nations, the international community, and non-governmental entities.

Conclusion

Regardless of the accuracy of the current succession rumors, Kim Jong-il's declining health underscores the need for the U.S. to prepare as thoroughly as possible for the inevitable leadership change in North Korea. The U.S. and its allies should review intelligence collection strategies to discern whether additional assets can be deployed in *ad hoc* situations as well as for long-term monitoring.

Washington must prepare diplomatic, economic, and military responses to the range of potential scenarios that could ensue from a regime collapse in Pyongyang. The Obama Administration should augment trilateral coordination with both Seoul and Tokyo as well as confer with Beijing to prevent miscalculation during a North Korean crisis. A lack of preparation could result in greater risk of unsecured North Korean nuclear weapons, North Korean instability that threatens the U.S. and its allies, and potential military confrontation between the U.S. and China.

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APPENDIX

Detecting and Predicting North Korean Regime Change

Despite the serious security ramifications that a North Korean leadership transition or struggle would have for the U.S. and its allies, Washington may struggle to discern and decipher signs of rapidly unfolding events. The opaqueness of North Korea and the inherent constraints on all U.S. intelligence sources will hamper a rapid and clear assessment.

Imagery intelligence is hampered by geographic factors such as terrain-masking, as well as Pyongyang's inclination to place its military installations and weapons underground. Signals intelligence is restricted by landline or secured communications. Human intelligence must operate in an extremely restrictive environment with a closed and suspicious populace overseen by several security services. North Korea's homogeneous ethnicity also restricts the ability of outsiders to infiltrate the population.

There is an inherent delay in the synergistic integration of all intelligence sources. There is also a constant need to evaluate the credibility of the intelligence and the reliability of the source to determine whether it provides believable, actionable intelligence.

Given the paucity of reliable information, the rapidity with which events could transpire, and the significance of the potential impact on U.S. and allied security interests, it is useful to prepare a list of indicators for determining which scenario is most likely unfolding.

Is a Succession Underway?

A. Signs of Singular Leadership

- References to generational aspect of Kim Il-sung's leadership, particularly references to third generation.
- Laudatory references to the mother and family of the successor.
- Propaganda extolling the virtues of the successor if only by code phrase; e.g., Kim Jong-il was initially referred to enigmatically as "the party center."
- Greater public glorification of the successor's lineage and connection to Kim Il-sung and/or Kim Jong-il.
- Designation of the successor assuming new positions of authority in the Korea Workers Party, the military, or National Defense Commission.
- Growing public visibility of the successor; e.g., on-site inspections;
- Initiation of new campaigns taken in the name of the successor; e.g., to increase productivity or raise military capabilities.
- Designation of a supporting infrastructure, including a cadre of senior officials in a position to mobilize support but not to compete for leadership, as an "advisory council" that can guide and deter internal opposition to the new leader.
- Establishment of loyalty campaigns, including pledges of fealty to the new leader through existing institutional channels of political control, down to the local level.

B. Signs of Collective Leadership

- Propaganda emphasizing organizations over individuals.
- Organizations gaining stature, either increased formal authority or greater propaganda adulation.
- Repeated public appearances of a coterie of leaders, including meetings with foreign leaders.
- References to a new situation requiring new types of leadership and different responses than those in the past; e.g., the evolving nature of North Korea's leadership or Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's having laid the groundwork for the next step in leading North Korea.

- Establishment of institutions or inclusion of individuals within institutions that can enhance horizontal, collaborative control mechanisms among otherwise competing power centers at the top of North Korean society.
- Announcement of a formal advisory role for a senior party/military leader or creation of a new advisory panel in conjunction with selection of Kim Jong-eun.

Is the Succession Failing?

(Note: Some actions listed below could be implemented by the regime as preventive measures to preclude potential opposition.)

- Silence in North Korean media regarding succession after previously formal announcements.
- Conflicting signals on succession or policy direction.
- Increased references to “time of crisis” or attempts by foreign countries to take advantage of uncertainty during North Korean succession.
- Lack of public appearances by senior leadership members.
- Infighting among rivals.
- Purges of rivals or critics.
- Increase in senior-level defections.
- Recall of North Korean diplomats from overseas.
- Closing of borders and increased military presence.
- Restrictions on internal travel, including closure of Pyongyang.
- Roadblocks on approach routes to Pyongyang.
- Increased efforts to maintain social control and the flow of information; e.g., campaigns against illicit foreign information (broadcasts, videos, etc.).
- Indications of growing dissent, resistance, or unrest.
- Government or media criticism of previous policies, most notably *chuche* (North Korean self-reliance); Kimilsungism (North Korea’s political system); and *songon* (military-first policy).
- Reports of assassinations of senior government leaders or attempted coups.
- Unusual military activity (scope or timing), such as:
 1. Out-of-cycle training.
 2. Change in levels of military communications.
 3. Confusion in military communications.
 4. Issuance of ammunition outside of the training cycle.
 5. Increased presence of security units in Pyongyang.
 6. Increased security force presence in military units.
 7. Reports of uprisings by military units (e.g., the Sixth Corps Incident).
 8. Raising of military readiness levels.
 9. Cancellation of leave/recall of military personnel on leave.
 10. Activation of civilian wartime alert status levels.
 11. Unusual military movements, particularly near Pyongyang.

12. Rising belligerent rhetoric and tactical activity against South Korea near the northern limit line (NLL) or demilitarized zone (DMZ).
13. Increased activity at air bases, naval facilities, and ground maneuver units near the DMZ (e.g., by the 815th or 806th Mechanized Corps).
14. Increased activity at short- and medium-range missile units or suspected nuclear sites.
15. Heightened military activity by China along its border with North Korea.

Changes in North Korean Policy Caused by Succession

- Ideological pronouncements in official media that differ in policy, form, or nuance; e.g., a change from emphasis on *songun* (military first).
- Change in the level of demonization of the United States in propaganda.
- Changed focus on the role of nuclear weapons for defense of North Korea.
- Suggestions of a willingness by the North Korean government to return to negotiations.
- Positive comments by government officials about Chinese-style economic reform.
- Greater openness to foreign humanitarian and economic assistance, including agreeing to more stringent monitoring requirements.