

BACKGROUND

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Uncertainties over North Korea's Leadership Transition: Broader Contingency Planning Is Essential for Regional Stability

Bruce Klingner

Abstract

An inexperienced young man—Kim Jong-un—is, at least for the moment, in control of North Korea, the world's most volatile nuclear power. While this scenario might sound like the plot line of a Hollywood blockbuster, for America and her allies, the challenges of Jong-un's ascension are proving all too real. Although North Korea's dynastic succession is well underway, continuity of leadership does not guarantee regional stability—a fact underlined by Pyongyang's recent announcement that next month it will conduct a long-range missile test. If North Korea chooses to continue its policy of repression and foreign aggression, Washington and its allies should be prepared to enact a list of policies—ranging from negotiations to missile defense—designed to neutralize and ultimately diminish the North Korean threat.

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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With no apparent threat from potential challengers or a popular uprising, North Korea's dynastic leadership succession is well underway. New North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has survived the initial transfer of power that followed his father Kim Jong-il's death and is, at least officially, exclusively in charge. Yet, despite Pyongyang's efforts to indicate that Jong-un is in sole control of the country, it is more likely that North Korea is being ruled by a collective leadership.

The likelihood of a sustained regime and, therefore, stability is greater now than had Kim Jong-il died after suffering a massive stroke in August 2008. At that time, the North Korean constitution lacked a provision for leadership transition, and succession plans had not been announced—a scenario that presented tremendous potential for a contested power grab. During the intervening three years between Jong-il's 2008 stroke and his death, however, North Korea implemented a leadership succession plan to anoint Jong-un.

Yet sudden leadership change, with its attendant stability risks, remains a real possibility. The North Korean ship of state has never had such an inexperienced hand on the

TALKING POINTS

- New North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has survived the initial transfer of power that followed the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, and is, at least officially, exclusively in charge.
- Continuity of leadership, however, does not guarantee regional stability.
- Although the leadership succession appears to be on track, the United States must prepare for an unexpected North Korean collapse with attendant security, political, and economic challenges.
- North Korea's announcement of an April 2012 missile test reinforces that whether ruled by Kim Jong-un or through a collective leadership, North Korea's current policies—aggression abroad and repression at home—will continue.
- If North Korea chooses to continue its policy of domestic repression and foreign aggression, Washington and its allies should be prepared to enact a list of policies—ranging from negotiations to missile defense—designed to neutralize and ultimately diminish the North Korean threat.

tiller—a daunting prospect as it attempts to sail through the treacherous waters of economic failure and international isolation. Even an initially efficacious succession could deteriorate into a power struggle, with fissures among the senior leadership arising over time. Credible reports of coup and assassination attempts during Kim Jong-il's reign demonstrate the strong possibility that an explosive event could blast Pyongyang off course, plunging North Korea, as well as the U.S. and the Asia-Pacific region, into treacherous, uncharted waters.

Persistent Uncertainty

Although Jong-un's ascent appears to be proceeding as planned, the seeds for a coup or collapse may even now be present. Given the nature of the informational black hole that is North Korea, little is known of what political wrangling might be occurring behind the curtain. The absence of an independent domestic or foreign media presence in North Korea prevents timely identification of potential coup indicators such as anti-regime unrest.

It is likely that even the United States intelligence community will have difficulty predicting or identifying rapid leadership change. Washington—in conjunction with its allies—must therefore establish contingency plans to facilitate rapid and effective responses to sudden change in North Korea.

The North Korean regime has shown remarkable resilience over the past 15 years and once again could belie repeated predictions of its imminent demise. Indeed, there

is a possibility that North Korea's neighbors, fearful of the consequences of collapse, could alter their policies to reduce pressure on a faltering regime—a scenario that, once again, would allow the hard-line regime to survive.

Continuity of leadership, however, does not guarantee regional stability. For instance, despite Jong-un's apparently effective succession, North Korea's pledge to launch a long-range missile in mid-April would violate U.N. Security Council resolutions while exacerbating tensions on the Peninsula. While North Korean instability poses a threat to U.S. national interests, such instability is hardly the only challenge Pyongyang presents to Washington. Belligerent behavior, whether by Kim Jong-un or another ruler, also jeopardizes America's interests, and such behavior should be expected, as Pyongyang has routinely used threats, provocations, and military attacks to gain its objectives.

WASHINGTON—IN CONJUNCTION WITH ITS ALLIES—MUST ESTABLISH CONTINGENCY PLANS TO FACILITATE RAPID AND EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO SUDDEN CHANGE IN NORTH KOREA.

Regardless of whether Kim Jong-un remains in power, uncertainty regarding the stability of the North Korean regime and its policies is skyrocketing. The inherent contradiction between Pyongyang's February 29 pledge of a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and its March 16 announcement of a forthcoming missile launch raises questions

about the coherence of North Korean decision making—questions that are triggering heightened concerns in Washington and Seoul.

Preparing for the Transition

The origins of Kim Jong-un's ascension remain shrouded in mystery. In 2005–2006, it was speculated that Kim Jong-il's second son, Kim Jong-chol, had been chosen as his father's successor.

Whether Jong-chol was replaced by Jong-un or had never been a contender remains unclear. Kim's first son, Kim Jong-nam, now living in Macau, recently told a Japanese journalist that “my father was not initially interested in having any of us becoming his successor. In fact, he was against the idea of a three-generation succession.”¹ Kim's initial opposition to a second dynastic succession appears to have been altered, however, by the massive strokes he suffered in August 2008, a development that may have altered, or at least accelerated, succession plans.

While initial reports regarding the leadership transition were cryptic, by mid-2009, Pyongyang had informed the army, the presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, and its embassies that Jong-un had been designated Kim Jong-il's successor.² Then, in September 2010, a Party Conference of the Korea Workers Party (KWP) provided the first public indication of Kim Jong-un's ascension: He was appointed Vice Chairman of the KWP Central Military Commission and elevated to four-star general—despite having never served in the military. Kim family members and staunch

1. Yoji Gomi, “Kim Jong-nam's Exclusive Interview: Kim Jong-un—My Fateful Brother,” *Shukan Bunshun*, January 26, 2012.

2. Kuwait News Agency, “South Korean Spy Agency Confirms North Korean Leader's Third Son as Successor,” 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 26, 2012).

supporters were subsequently placed in senior positions to ensure the leadership transition.

Purges. During the past two years, numerous senior officials have been removed from office, reportedly as a purge of those resistant to a second North Korean dynastic succession. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il had conducted similar purges during their reigns to eliminate real and perceived challengers. From 2010–2011, at least 100 senior NK officials were purged,³ including three vice premiers and three ministers.

In addition to the government purges, executions and detentions were also used to quell any potential resistance to the new regime. For example, Planning and Finance Department Director Pak Nam-gi and Director of Finance Moon Il-bong were executed—scapegoats for North Korea’s failed currency revaluation, which had originally been attributed to Kim Jong-un.⁴ Sixty public executions were held in 2010, and numerous senior officials were executed or detained by the State Security Department.⁵

Glorification of Kim Jong-un. Shortly after Kim Jong-il’s death, the Politburo decreed that Kim Jong-un—in accordance with his father’s wishes—was now supreme commander of the Korea People’s Army. Subsequently, North Korea’s important joint New Year’s Day editorial declared the establishment of a “unified command system” under Jong-un, who was now “the supreme leader of our Party, our state, and our

army” and head of the Party Central Committee. By conferring such titles on its new leader, Pyongyang is attempting to quash any questions of legitimacy or capability.

It is unknown, however, whether Jong-un has been appointed head of the National Defense Commission (NDC). After Kim Il-sung was designated “Eternal President” of North Korea after his death in 1994, Kim Jong-il transformed the NDC, which he ruled as chairman, into North Korea’s most powerful government organization. According to Articles 100 and 102 of the North Korean Constitution, the chairman of the NDC is the supreme leader of North Korea and supreme commander of the armed forces.

In April 2012, North Korea will convene another KWP Party Conference (only the fourth in North Korea’s history). At that time, Jong-un is likely to be formally appointed to some or all of his father’s previous positions: Chairman of the NDC, General Secretary of the KWP, and Presidium Member of the KWP Political Bureau, all of them granted to lend credibility to Jong-un’s ascension.

In addition to such formal appointments, Pyongyang has been using its considerable propaganda machines to extol the legitimacy of Kim Jong-un’s succession. For instance, North Korea’s official media linked Jong-un to his grandfather Kim Il-sung and father Kim Jong-il by declaring the “continuation of the revolutionary march

that started up on Mt. Paektu⁶...the successor to the revolutionary cause of *juche*...and the dear respected Kim Jong-un is precisely the great Kim Jong-il.” Jong-un is now also described with terms previously reserved for his father: e.g., “a great person born of heaven” and “the spiritual pillar and the lighthouse of hope.”

North Korea also credited Jong-un with directing North Korea’s 2009 nuclear test—which “frightened” the country’s enemies⁷—and test launch of the Taepo Dong II missile. A January 2012 documentary film showed Kim Jong-un with Kim Jong-il in the missile launch center and declared, “It was [Kim Jong-un] who counterattacked the enemy’s tactic of threatening to intercept an earth satellite [Taepo Dong-2 missile].” The film quoted Jong-un as stating, “if the enemy intercepts, I made the determination to actually start a war.”⁸

Jong-un was also credited with Pyongyang’s two attacks on South Korea in 2010. According to a North Korean military document obtained by South Korea, in January 2010, Kim told North Korean military leaders that the inter-Korean situation “will become very tense in February and March”; the South Korean corvette ship *Cheonan* was sunk in March 2010. In preparation for North Korea’s November 2010 artillery attack, Jong-un was depicted as having personally directed artillery firing drills—based on his military school thesis—to “pound

3. “Kim Jong-il’s Bloody Purges,” *Chosun Ilbo*, June 9, 2010.

4. “Purges Ensure Kim Jong-un’s Succession,” *Chosun Ilbo*, December 27, 2011.

5. “North Korea Purging Protégés of the Old Guard,” *Chosun Ilbo*, January 10, 2011.

6. The site of Korea’s legendary founding in 2333 B.C. and where Kim Jong-il was “officially” born (a claim since disproven).

7. Associated Press, “North Korea Credits New Leader Kim Jong Un with Past Nuclear Testing,” January 20, 2012.

8. “N. Korea Marks New Leader’s Birthday in Low-key Fashion,” *Donga Ilbo*, January 9, 2012.

the waters near Baeknyeong and Yeonpyeong Islands.”⁹

Different Leader, Same Policies

Whether ruled by Kim Jong-un, another viable despot, or a collective leadership, North Korea’s current policies—aggression abroad and repression at home—will continue. There have been several clear signs that the North Korean ship of state will stay on its present course.

Affirmation of *Songun*. Perhaps the most telling of these indicators is Pyongyang’s affirmation of its *songun* (military first) policy. For example:

- In December 2001, *Nodong Shinmun*, the official journal of the Korea Workers Party, announced, “We should walk our own path of the *juche* (self-reliance), *songun* (military-first) revolution by keeping the legacy of comrade Kim Jong-il.” The article calls on Kim Jong-un to pursue three objectives: North Korea’s military-first policy, unification of the two Koreas, and establishment of a strong and prosperous nation.¹⁰
- North Korea’s 2012 New Year’s joint editorial underscored that the regime will “make no slightest vacillation and concession in implementing the instructions

and policies [of Kim Jong-il]... [W]e will allow no change.” The editorial further advised that “The *Songun*-based revolutionary leadership of Kim Jong-il [will] continue without interruption [and] we shall consolidate the national defense capabilities in every way under the unfurled banner of *Songun*.”¹¹

Pyongyang also indicated that it would continue to resist fulfilling its Six-Party Talks denuclearization requirements: “As recognized by the world, the DPRK is a full-fledged nuclear weapons state and its nuclear deterrent is the revolutionary heritage which can never be bartered for anything.”¹²

No Improvement in Inter-Korean Relations. In the New Year’s editorial, Pyongyang emphasized that it would not soften its hard-line stance against South Korea. Such a stance marks a regression from the previous year’s editorial, which, following North Korea’s two deadly attacks against South Korea in 2010, advocated reducing tensions through dialogue and joint cooperative projects.

In addition to the New Year’s editorial, Pyongyang has issued numerous other statements reinforcing its belligerent stance toward South Korea. For example:

- On December 30, 2011, the National Defense Commission declared that “We solemnly declare to the world’s foolish politicians, including the puppets in South Korea, that they should not expect any changes from us.”
- The commission also avowed that “We have no intention of ever dealing with Lee Myung-bak’s group of traitors.... [T]he sea of bloody tears from our military and people will follow the puppet regime until the end. The tears will turn into a sea of revengeful fire that burns everything.”¹³
- Last February, Pyongyang declared that it was not interested in inter-Korean dialogue: “South Korea has permanently lost qualification to talk about the improvement of North–South relations.”¹⁴

Such statements leave little doubt that, despite regime change, North Korea will remain hostile toward its neighbor to the south.

Pyongyang also dashed the hopes of those who had predicted that the Western-educated Kim Jong-un might be more amenable to implementing political and economic reform and opening the country to the outside world. Instead, North Korea has vowed to

9. “Kim Jong-un Masterminded Attacks on S. Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo*, August 3, 2011, and “NK Heir Apparent Directed Artillery Drills in January,” *Donga Ilbo*, March 2, 2010.

10. “North: Son Will Carry on Father’s Legacy,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 23, 2011, at <http://koreajoongangdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2946031&cloc=rss|news|joongangdaily> (March 29, 2012).

11. “New Years Day Editorial,” DPRK, January 1, 2012, at <http://nkleadershipwatch.wordpress.com/the-party/2012-joint-new-years-editorial/> (March 29, 2012).

12. KCNA, “CPRK Blasts Lee Myung-bak’s New Year Address,” January 5, 2012, at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2012/201201/news05/20120105-52ee.html> (March 26, 2012).

13. Reuters, “North Korea’s New Leaders Lash Out at South Korea and Allies,” December 30, 2011, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/30/us-korea-north-idUSTRE7BT04S20111230> (March 28, 2012).

14. Kim Yoon-mi, “N. Korea Rejects Seoul’s Offer of Pest Control Talks,” *Korea Herald*, February 9, 2012, at <http://www.koreaherald.com/national/Detail.jps?newsMLId=20120209000867> (April 4, 2012).

tighten its ideological censorship against dangerous foreign influences. Specifically, the New Year's joint editorial vowed to maintain a "revolutionary, healthy atmosphere by strengthening the fight to eradicate exotic living customs and destroying the penetration of imperialistic ideology and culture."¹⁵

Despite its change in leadership, North Korea remains determined to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities while maintaining its belligerent foreign policy. Consequently, Pyongyang will continue to be a multifaceted strategic threat to the U.S. and its Asia-Pacific allies.

Will the Succession Hold?

Leadership transition is one thing, but ruling a decrepit country and being responsible for its complicated interactions with the outside world is another. Regardless of who is in control, North Korea will continue to face dire challenges that would test any leader—particularly one who is as young and inexperienced as Kim Jong-un. These challenges include:

- Abysmal economic conditions, including endemic food shortages and widespread malnutrition;
- A failed economic system and failed economic policies;
- Government resistance to economic reform and opening up the country since both are perceived as increasing the risk of regime instability;
- Global donor fatigue after 15 years of massive North Korean food requests without the regime

taking any steps to reduce recurrence of need;

- Few allies and near total isolation from the outside world;
- Extensive international sanctions; and
- A more brittle system than in 1994 when Kim Jong-il formally assumed power.

As a leader, Kim Jong-un is but a pale reflection of his father and grandfather. He has little experience or accomplishments and has not had the decades of grooming and establishing of a power base that Jong-il enjoyed before assuming control from his own father, Kim Il-sung. 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, Jong-il was, for all intents and purposes, already running the country.

Domestic Stabilization.

Despite the above-noted challenges, Pyongyang has for years demonstrated a remarkable ability to overcome domestic and foreign pressures that appeared to portend unavoidable regime collapse. Sudden regime change would be difficult due to the pervasiveness and brutality of North Korea's security services, which operate not only against the populace, but also against the senior echelons of power. Chang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law and often referred to as the "second most powerful man in North Korea," was twice purged from office.

The North Korean leadership perceives altering policies or relaxing control as dangerous and believes that such change sparked the collapse of regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and, most recently, the Middle East. Regime collapse also risks North Korea's absorption by South Korea and tribunals for members of the leadership—a scenario the country's rulers will do anything to avoid. Furthermore, the North Korean elites perceive a vested interest in maintaining and defending the current system, including the transfer of power to Kim Jong-un, as they view their fate as inexorably linked to that of the regime.

A common refrain among experts on Korea is that the North Korean military may try to take over, but the country and its leadership system are so militarized that there is no clear distinction between the party and the military. The interlocking nature of the party, state, and military leadership makes it clear that in North Korea, the "military" is not a separate entity.

Finally, the North Korean system has often been depicted to U.S. negotiators and academics as riven by factionalism between the hard-line military and the more accommodating foreign ministry. The reality is that any such distinction is minor and more reflective of "good cop/bad cop" tactics.

External Stabilization. In the long term, Kim Jong-il's death could provide an opportunity to curb North Korea's brutal oppression of its populace, as well as its belligerent behavior toward its neighbors. But for the foreseeable future, the highest priority for the United States,

15. "New Year Editorial Hails Jong-un," *Korea Joongang Daily*, January 2, 2012, at <http://koreajoongangdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=2946468> (March 28, 2012).

as well as North Korea's neighbors, will be averting the catastrophic consequences that could result from instability within the nuclear-armed country.

China and South Korea—the latter particularly under a progressive (liberal) government—would therefore take a number of steps to seek to prevent North Korean instability, including the delivery of large quantities of food and fuel. Beijing will continue to oppose U.S. efforts to impose additional pressure on Pyongyang in the U.N. Security Council, and even though the United States finds the North Korean regime loathsome, Washington will not try to induce regime collapse or overthrow of the government: The resulting instability would simply be too dangerous.

Potential for Popular Uprising Low...But Increasing

North Korea's harrowing economic conditions and growing social disparity create the conditions for social unrest—conditions that have been exacerbated by the people's increasing access to outside information. Public protests and riots sparked by the regime's forced currency revaluation in 2009 demonstrated a greater willingness among the North Korean people to confront the regime, as well as the potential for even more extensive rebellions in the future.

Indeed, the public response to the currency revaluation was strong enough to force a policy reversal by the regime. It was noted that, although state security services were able to quell the protests, Pyongyang warned of a massive crackdown and retaliation against subversive activities—an indication that, in the eyes of

the government, popular dissent was rising beyond the danger level.¹⁶

Despite the regime's rigid controls against the infiltration of news from the outside world, such information is seeping into the country. There are now one million cell phones in North Korea, although only smuggled Chinese cell phones or phones belonging to elites can transmit beyond the nation's borders. In addition, foreign radio broadcasts, propaganda delivered from South Korea via balloons, and smuggled DVDs and computer thumb drives all pose a threat to the regime's monopoly on information.

However, North Korea is most susceptible to a regime change sparked by an internal power struggle, not by a popular revolutionary movement. Given that even the most repressed Arab society was exponentially more open and less controllable than North Korea, an "Arab Spring"–style uprising on the Peninsula is unlikely.

Despite some inroads, the penetration of outside media remains minimal. There are no social media networks in North Korea that would enable the communication of independent information or the organization of mass demonstrations. Foreign media are nonexistent in North Korea or tightly controlled, thereby preventing transmission of images of protest and uprising of the sort that proved influential in the Arab uprisings.

Furthermore, there are no opposition or resistance movements around which the populace might rally. Nor are there identifiable reformers advocating alternative policies within the existing government—let alone an opposition figure (e.g., Aung San Suu

Kyi, Lech Walesa, or Vaclav Havel) or opposition party capable of providing a competing ideology.

Stability in the Near Term

Throughout the remainder of 2012, continued regime cohesion under Kim Jong-un is most likely. Jong-un will be able to rely on his bloodline and initial transference of titles for legitimacy as ruler. He will also be able to eliminate potential challengers through purges, though excessive culling risks triggering attacks by those who are fearful for their own safety.

Beyond that, however, Kim Jong-un will have to do more than simply consolidate power. He will need to develop his own source of legitimacy, either through foreign policy successes or by improving the country's economic situation.

Additionally, the North Korean elite will assess Kim Jong-un's ability to protect their equities. Over time, senior leaders may conclude that Jong-un's shortcomings are sufficient justification for contesting his succession. Elite resistance to Jong-un's rule could manifest itself in outright opposition or in usurping his power and leaving him a mere figurehead.

Collapse: What Next? A failed succession brought on by a coup or the assassination of Kim Jong-un could result in the collapse of the regime while the North Korean government remained functional. Alternatively, such a scenario could trigger the collapse of the entire state, with rivals calling on military units for support, leading to armed clashes.

If any situation became so dire as to bring about the collapse of the regime, it could also lead to North Korea's loss of control over

16. "Signs of Unrest," *The Korea Herald*, February 16, 2010.

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.

Other low-probability but high-impact scenarios include:

- A power vacuum;
- Civil war among warring factions; and
- Internal unrest extensive enough that it prompts Beijing or Seoul to intervene— particularly if concern over control of North Korea’s nuclear weapons arises, raising the potential for miscalculation and armed confrontation.

Additionally, North Korea’s neighbors might preemptively intervene because they fear that such instability could create an “explosion” (aggressive actions toward South Korea or Japan) or “implosion” (regime collapse).

Stable North Korea: Still a Threat

To secure his leadership credibility, Kim Jong-un will maintain the policies that North Korea has pursued since the 1940s, including threats, provocations, and military attacks. Kim Jong-un will be as aggressive as his father Kim Jong-il—perhaps even more so. Consequently, even a stable North Korea will continue to sow chaos throughout the region.

A stable North Korea poses one particularly notable danger: Because Kim Jong-un lacks the experience

that his father had before he was anointed leader, there is a greater potential for miscalculation; Jong-un could stumble over a policy redline that his father would have known not to cross, precipitating a strong U.S. or South Korean military response. In fact, he may not realize that, as a result of the attacks on the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island,¹⁷ Seoul has moved the redline and is now more likely to retaliate against another North Korean provocation.

Specifically, after the attacks in 2010, South Korean President Lee brought in a new, tougher defense minister; changed the rules of engagement when dealing with North Korea; augmented military forces and sensors in the West Sea; and secured tacit permission from Washington to use Korean F-15s without prior U.S. concurrence—all factors that increase the likelihood that South Korea will retaliate against a future North Korean provocation.

It is important to distinguish between North Korea’s leader and North Korea’s policies. The succession could fail, with Kim Jong-un replaced either by a challenger or by a cabal of the leadership elites, but the system that survived would continue to threaten the region.

North Korea in 2012: Expectations

Based on past actions, North Korea can be expected to engage in a comprehensive strategy to secure its leadership transition, gain foreign economic assistance, and secure international recognition as a nuclear weapons state. Some of these steps are already underway. Specifically, the regime is working to:

- **Consolidate the leadership succession by:**
 1. Emphasizing Kim Jong-un’s legitimacy by extolling the continuation of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il’s legacy and policies;
 2. Propagating extensive domestic propaganda glorification of Jong-un to make it more difficult for a rival to challenge Kim Jong-il’s leadership succession decision; and
 3. Underscoring the need to rally around Kim Jong-un against foreign threats.
- **Send signals through international propaganda and private diplomatic channels** that Jong-un is a potential reformer willing to engage with the United States, South Korea, and Japan.
- **Engage in a “charm offensive”** by publicly declaring Pyongyang’s decision to freeze nuclear activities at Yongbyon, readmit IAEA inspectors, and increase inter-Korean engagement through multiple venues (diplomatic, military-to-military talks, cultural exchanges, etc.), thus fulfilling some of the preconditions demanded by Washington and Seoul before returning to Six-Party Talks.
- **Accept international demands for stringent monitoring requirements** in order to receive large-scale foreign food assistance. Gaining U.S. agreement to provide 240,000 tons of nutritional

17. An international investigation team determined that North Korea sank the South Korean naval corvette *Cheonan* in South Korean territorial waters in March 2010, killing 46 sailors. North Korean artillery shelled Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010, killing two South Korean Marines and two civilians.

assistance would also increase pressure on Seoul to resume deliveries of food aid.

- **Focus diplomatic efforts on the United States while** minimizing engagement with Seoul to prevent President Lee Myung-bak from claiming any diplomatic success before South Korea's legislative election in April. This includes continuing to blame Lee's "hard-line" policies for degrading inter-Korean relations while rejecting any responsibility for Pyongyang's two attacks against South Korea in 2010.
- **Avoid initiating a military clash with Seoul** prior to South Korea's legislative election. Doing so would impair South Korean progressive (liberal) candidates' potential for replacing conservatives in the National Assembly and their advocacy of greater South Korean engagement on less conditional terms with Pyongyang.
- **Engage in propaganda attacks** on alleged U.S. and South Korean "preparations for invasion" during the annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle military exercises to provide "justification" for subsequent North Korean nuclear and missile tests.
- **Conduct nuclear and/or missile tests if** bilateral discussions with the United States are deemed to be unproductive.

- **Initiate threats and engage in provocative behavior** prior to U.S. and South Korean presidential elections if Washington and Seoul have not provided sufficient economic and diplomatic benefits by late 2012. Both countries will be eager to prevent a crisis on the eve of their elections and could be more malleable.

Successful long-range missile and nuclear tests would increase fears that North Korea had achieved the ability to threaten the United States with a nuclear weapon. Pyongyang would believe that this increased pressure on Washington to return to Six-Party Talks at least to cap the nuclear and missile threats even if complete elimination was unattainable.

Bumpy Road Back to Engagement

On February 29, Washington and Pyongyang announced an agreement on North Korean nuclear activities. In return for U.S. affirmations of non-hostile intent and 240,000 tons of nutritional assistance, Pyongyang "agreed to a moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment activity at Yongbyon and [will] allow the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] to monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment while productive dialogues continue."¹⁸

After nearly four years of refusal, North Korea's agreement to freeze its nuclear activities under international observation marked a major policy reversal. This development, though

positive, represented a tactical rather than strategic breakthrough. When negotiating with North Korea, the devil is always in the details: The agreement was limited in scope, with details characteristically vague.

The agreement's most glaring omission was any North Korean commitment to improving relations with South Korea, a commitment that was one of both Washington's and Seoul's longstanding requirements. Furthermore, the agreement required North Korea only to accept IAEA inspectors at the Yongbyon nuclear facility; Pyongyang's November 2010 disclosure of an extensive uranium enrichment program at Yongbyon, which was relocated from another location, demonstrated that there are additional covert nuclear sites that should be subject to verification in any subsequent agreements.

U.S. officials indicated that the primary function of this most recent agreement was simply to enable future bilateral meetings, where the parties would struggle over framing the agenda for a possible eventual return to the Six-Party Talks. However, even a resumption of the Six-Party Talks would not be a victory in itself but simply the beginning of long, arduous negotiations—the diplomatic equivalent of putting weary boxers back in the ring for round two of a 15-round bout.

Although some observers interpreted the February agreement as indicative of a major shift in policy by Kim Jong-un, U.S. officials indicated that the same agreement would have been reached during a December

18. Reuters, "North Korea Agrees to Nuclear Moratorium, IAEA Inspections," February 29, 2012, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/29/us-korea-north-usa-talks-idUSTRE81S13R20120229> (April 3, 2012).

bilateral meeting that was cancelled due to Kim Jong-il's death.

Undercutting Diplomatic Outreach

Setting what must be a new record for breaking its word, on March 16, 2012, North Korea announced that it would launch a satellite in mid-April, a provocative move that jeopardized the February 29 diplomatic agreement with the United States. Despite Pyongyang's attempts to portray the launch as a peaceful civilian satellite program, it would be an unequivocal violation of U.N. Resolutions 1718 and 1874, which preclude any North Korean "ballistic missile activity."¹⁹

If North Korea carries out its announced missile launch, it would derail the Obama Administration's attempts to offer nutritional assistance and diplomatic benefits to Pyongyang—an attempt to induce the regime to resume its denuclearization commitments and refrain from provocative behavior. A missile launch would prevent even near-term bilateral diplomatic meetings, lest it be interpreted as Washington condoning Pyongyang's violation of U.N. resolutions.

Although ostensibly planned to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of North Korea's first leader, Kim Il-sung, the April missile launch would also serve several other objectives. First, it would signal that, despite the death of Kim Jong-il, North Korea is not weak or subject to coercion during forthcoming negotiations with the United States. Second, the launch would support the ongoing leadership transition to Kim Jong-un by highlighting his personal strength and martial prowess.

North Korea has a proclivity for taking provocative actions precisely when Washington and its allies have begun diplomatic attempts at engagement. Indeed, North Korea's proposed April launch threatens to transform the February 29 "Leap Day Agreement" into one that is more reminiscent of Bill Murray's movie *Groundhog Day* in which negotiators are doomed to repeating the same agreement over and over again.

What the United States Should Do

The United States should continue discussions with North Korea—if for no other reason than to probe whether Pyongyang is willing to denuclearize in return for economic and diplomatic benefits. Such negotiations will be lengthy, arduous, and potentially unsuccessful, but they may also provide a means first to cap and then to reduce a growing security threat to the United States and its allies.

However, such engagement should not be perceived either as a means to empower nonexistent reformist elements in Pyongyang or as a panacea for North Korean provocations. The regime chooses to ramp up tension, which it sees as increasing its leverage, when it perceives that it is being ignored or to increase its leverage for attaining its objectives, and it will continue to do so regardless of whether it is sitting across a negotiation table.

Diplomacy. If North Korea launches a missile, the U.S. should:

- **Suspend plans** to ship 240,000 tons of nutritional assistance to North Korea as delineated in the February 29 agreement.

- **Submit a new U.N. Security Council resolution** requiring more extensive sanctions on North Korea for yet another U.N. resolution. The new U.N. resolution should invoke Chapter VII, Article 42 of the U.N. Charter, which allows for enforcement by military means. This would enable naval ships to intercept and board North Korean ships suspected of transporting precluded nuclear, missile, and conventional arms, components, or technology. To date, China has insisted that U.N. resolutions adopt the weaker Article 41 provisions.

- **Demand that all U.N. member nations fully implement existing U.N. resolution requirements** to prevent North Korea's procurement and export of missile-related and WMD-related items and technology and freeze the financial assets of any involved North Korean or foreign person, company, or government entity. Any violating government, business, bank, or individual should be subject to sanctions.

Even if the April missile launch does not occur, the U.S. should still:

- **Insist that North Korea commit to complete and verifiable denuclearization.** Since the breakdown of Six-Party Talks in 2008, Pyongyang has repeatedly vowed never to give up its nuclear weapons. This is inconsistent with the Six-Party Talks agreements. Nor should Washington allow Pyongyang to use brinkmanship

19. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1874 (2009), June 12, 2009, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9679.doc.htm> (April 3, 2012).

and threats to redefine the parameters of the negotiations.

- **Require that future Six-Party Talks agreements be sufficiently detailed.** Such details must explicitly delineate linkage between North Korean steps toward denuclearization and economic and diplomatic benefits to be provided. Acquiescing to vague text provides a false sense of advancement and allows Pyongyang to exploit loopholes and avoid its denuclearization commitments.
- **Maintain sanctions** until the behavior that triggered them has ceased, rebuffing Pyongyang's entreaties to abandon punitive measures to "improve the negotiating atmosphere." Diplomacy and pressure tactics should both be part of a comprehensive strategy.
- **Ensure that Seoul is not left on the sidelines.** When engaging North Korea, Washington must condition any bilateral progress on Pyongyang's resuming inter-Korean talks.
- **Expand public diplomacy** to promote greater North Korean exposure to the outside world through both overt and covert means. Washington and Seoul should facilitate formal government, academic, and cultural exchange programs while using a variety of distribution methods to expose the citizenry to the true nature of the regime.

Security. In addition to diplomatic measures, the U.S. must pursue the following security policies to ensure that it has the capability to meet any threats from a belligerent North

Korea—regardless of who is controlling the regime:

- **Develop multilateral contingency planning for effective crisis response.** The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should coordinate their national contingency plans for North Korean scenarios and conduct joint exercises to identify these plans' weaknesses.
- **Affirm unequivocal commitment to defending South Korea and Japan** through the promise of extended deterrence comprised of conventional forces, missile defense, and the nuclear umbrella.
- **Maintain a robust forward-deployed military presence in South Korea and Japan.** Such a presence is necessary to defend critical allies and maintain peace in Northeast Asia. The U.S. should augment training exercises in South Korea, including U.S. combat units deployed from the United States and U.S. forward bases in Asia in future training exercises on the Korean Peninsula.
- **Fully fund U.S. defense requirements.** Reducing U.S. military capabilities undercuts America's ability to defend its allies, deter security threats, and respond quickly to aggressive actions or natural disasters in Asia. The United States cannot cut defense spending by \$1 trillion over the next decade and still maintain its current level of deterrence and defense commitments.
- **Continue U.S. missile defense development and deployment** and call on South Korea to deploy a multi-layered missile defense

system that is interoperable with a U.S. regional missile network.

- **Encourage Japan to maintain its missile defense plans.** Previous North Korean missile launches spurred Tokyo to accelerate its missile defense plans. More recently, however, the Democratic Party of Japan-led government has expressed greater skepticism of missile defense than previous administrations.

Preparing for the Unexpected

The North Korean situation is not static; the country is deteriorating, which in turn increases the risk for sudden change. In many ways, it appears the regime cannot survive, though North Korea has outlasted many previous predictions of its demise. The leadership succession appears to be on track, but the United States must prepare for an unexpected North Korean collapse that will trigger a series of unique security, political, and economic challenges.

Yet, as experts debate whether Kim Jong-un will remain the captain of the North Korean ship of state, it is critical not to lose focus on a question of even greater importance: What is the likelihood that North Korea will continue to chart the same treacherous policy course? If North Korea chooses to continue its policy of domestic repression and foreign aggression, Washington and its allies should be prepared to enact a list of policies—ranging from negotiations to missile defense—designed to neutralize and ultimately diminish the North Korean threat.

—**Bruce Klingner** is Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.