

## Policy Forum 08-076: After Kim Jong-il



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By Peter M. Beck

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Peter M. Beck](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

### I. Introduction

Peter M. Beck, Professor at American University in Washington, D.C., writes, "there is a much greater likelihood that the North will come to resemble Burma rather than South Korea or China. A collective leadership system dominated by the military will likely emerge. However, it could be months or even years before the North's elites sort out who is in and who is out of the new ruling junta. The military will clearly be in the driver's seat. The only question is whether it will use a member of the Kim Royal Family as a hood ornament."

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## II. Article by Peter M. Beck

- "After Kim Jong-il"

By Peter M. Beck

Walking along Pyongyang's Taedong River with my most enlightened and curious North Korean guide and without anyone else within earshot, we were having a free-flowing discussion on topics ranging from life in South Korea to how North Korea is viewed by the rest of the world. But when I asked Ms. Kim who would take over when Kim Jong-il dies, her expression froze and she replied, "It would be better if you did not ask that question."

Recent reports that Chairman Kim suffered a stroke in mid-August beckon us to consider what will happen when he passes from the scene. At this point, beyond trying to recover his health, Kim's paramount concern is ensuring a smooth transfer of power to his anointed successor. He cannot be pleased with his options. For starters, Kim cannot be sure that the military junta likely to take over will have a need for any of his underwhelming family members.

Unless the Dear Leader can stay healthy for at least another decade, the Kim Dynasty will end. There are no indications that Kim is grooming any of his three sons for power. Kim himself became the "chosen one" in his early 30s and had the next two decades to prepare for his father's death. Eldest son Jong-nam (37) has been living the good life in Macao since getting caught trying to sneak into Japan in 2001. His second two sons are in their 20s and even more reclusive. Since leaving the ski slopes of Switzerland ten years ago, the only public sighting of son #2, Jong-chol, has been chasing rocker Eric Clapton around Europe. Even less is known about son #3. Even the most loyal general must suffer acutely from cognitive dissonance and at some level recognize that the genetic material is not improving with each generation.

A lateral succession (a la Fidel Castro) appears to be only marginally more viable. Half-brother Kim Pyong-il was exiled to Europe 20 years ago by being thrown a string of ambassadorships. Sister Kim Kyung-hui has held positions in the Korean Worker's Party and served in the Supreme People's Assembly, but has only been seen in public three times in the past decade. Chairman Kim is rumored to have married his personal secretary of the past two decades, Kim Ok, but little is known about her, other than that she accompanied Marshall Jo Myong-rok when he met with President Clinton in 2000. None of these family members seems capable of following in the wife of Chairman Mao's footsteps and forming a Gang of Four.

The only member of the royal family with a real chance of emerging from the succession scrum successfully is brother-in-law Jang Song-taek. He was a rising star in the Korean Worker's Party before being purged sometime in 2004. Jang studied in Moscow and has accompanied Kim Jong-il on several foreign trips. More importantly, he has developed a reputation for being a technocrat. A friend who accompanied Jang on his visit to Seoul in 2002 to observe the South Korean economy deemed him to be highly capable. Jang almost literally rose from the dead in 2006 (there were rumors he had died in a car accident) and was placed in charge of domestic security. Jang's chief weakness is that he does not have a military background, but his older brother is a general in the Korean People's Army (KPA).

The choices are even more unclear when we examine Kim's inner circle. The average age of the top 20 leaders attending 60th national day ceremonies on September 9 was nearly 80. *De facto* head of

state Kim Yong-nam (80) is emblematic of this group. A Western diplomat who met with him in July told me that he found him to be "engaged but elderly." He and his colleagues could serve as little more than caretakers should Chairman Kim become incapacitated. A system designed to block rivals from emerging makes leadership succession inherently problematic.

While it may be difficult to discern which individual or group will lead a post-Kim Jong-il government, the institutional king-maker and veto-holder is crystal-clear. In a totalitarian regime like North Korea, the military-security apparatus calls the shots. It was no accident that 11 out of Kim's last 14 public visits before falling ill were to military installations. Kim holds many titles, but first and foremost he is chairman of the National Defense Commission-all power flows through it. Senior members of the Commission hold titles in the other key institutions, namely the Central Military Committee, the Ministry of Public Security and the Korean Workers' Party. One's power is based on one's proximity to Kim and/or membership in one of these institutions. Despite the lack of a succession mechanism and the threat of renewed famine, the North Korean state remains formidable.

The lack of discernable factions within the National Defense Commission or the North Korean leadership more broadly provides us with a strong hint of how the succession saga will play out. In the absence of personal, regional or ideological groupings within the leadership, the North is unlikely to devolve into warlordism. Conversely, given that any signs of disloyalty can lead to an untimely death or banishment to a gulag, no one person is likely to go for the brass ring, certainly not an elderly general.

Nevertheless, the emergence of a military strongman cannot be ruled out. Both Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan were in their 40s and unknown outside the military when they launched their respective coups in 1961 and 1979. Beyond the top tier of octogenarians, we really know almost nothing about the North Korea's million-man military. Indeed, an iron fist that respects the invisible hand is probably the best-case (albeit unlikely) scenario for the North. Military leaders have accompanied Kim on his visits to China, so they at least know what successful economic reforms look like.

Unfortunately, there is a much greater likelihood that the North will come to resemble Burma rather than South Korea or China. A collective leadership system dominated by the military will likely emerge. However, it could be months or even years before the North's elites sort out who is in and who is out of the new ruling junta. The military will clearly be in the driver's seat. The only question is whether it will use a member of the Kim Royal Family as a hood ornament.

There are already signs that the North has turned inward and entered into a hunker-down mode. The six-party talks have stalled and North-South relations have undergone a deep freeze despite President Lee Myung-bak's repeated overtures. Of course, the ultimate losers will be the North Korean people. Only a lucky few will be given a chance to vote-with their feet.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)  
[back to top](#)

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)