


Dealing with North Korea Under Uncertain Leadership October 1st, 2008

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I. Introduction

Chung-in Moon, Professor of political science at Yonsei University in Seoul and special delegate to both inter-Korean summits, writes, "Rather than risking all of the negotiating gains made with North Korea thus far by provocative speculation, the international community should resume the calm, prudent and incremental approach it has more recently adopted in engaging the North, above all, by sustaining the Six Party Talks. Reducing uncertainty and enhancing stability in North Korea will be more rewarding than wishful thinking about its future implosion which can lead to serious calamities on the Korean peninsula and in the region as a whole."

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II. Article by Chung-in Moon

- "Dealing with North Korea Under Uncertain Leadership"
By Chung-in Moon

Concern over the health of Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, the oft vilified ruler of the axis of evil nation, has prompted South Korea and the United States to revive a contingency plan to deal with instability in the North that even includes preemptive strikes to prevent the transfer of nuclear materials or weapons. The stability of North Korea could conceivably be at risk if Kim were to die, but a plan for attack is not the first line of defense against loose nukes. Moving ahead on six-party talks is - for a

start, by delisting North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, as promised.

According to South Korean intelligence, Kim reportedly had surgery for a recent stroke, but has now recovered and is in stable condition. Nevertheless, the news of Kim's illness and his failure to appear on for the ceremony celebrating the 60th anniversary of North Korea's founding on September 9 sent shock waves to the outside world. These events triggered fears of instability in North Korea's leadership as well as profound concerns about a new threat to peace and security in Northeast Asia.

Most North Korean observers and even some policymakers wrongly see Chairman Kim's illness as the prelude to the country's implosion. Since the North's government is intrinsically dependent on Kim's cult of personality, it is a legitimate worry that Kim's physical incapacity or death may well precipitate a bitter factional struggle for succession and cause internal chaos, leading to a collapse like Ceausescu's Romania in 1989.

Such a development, they believe, could trigger the eruption of a protracted civil war, a massive outflow of refugees, and a possible intervention by China in North Korea. Perhaps the greatest worry to the Western world is the loss of control over North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and the increased possibility of their transfer to third parties. It cannot be ruled out that one of the warring factions in North Korea's military could steal nuclear materials or weapons and use them as bargaining leverage to obtain political recognition or hard currency.

The latter two scenarios, in particular, have greatly heightened security concerns of South Korea and the U.S. Seoul and Washington are known to have resumed bilateral discussions on upgrading their "contingency plan 5029" and transforming it from a "conceptual" to "operational" status. Plan '5029' reportedly includes preemptive military strikes by U.S. and South Korean Special Forces on suspected military targets in North Korea to eliminate or prevent the transfer of fissile materials or weapons. While this plan reflects preparation for a worst-case scenario, it is flawed in its assumptions and misguided in its operational solution.

Kim Jong-il is undoubtedly the absolute leader of North Korea, but he has governed the nation in close consultation with the National Defense Commission since 1999, when Kim began promoting his campaign of 'military first politics.' By now, the Commission has obtained greater power than the country's two other leadership bodies, the Korea Workers' Party and the Cabinet. During a period of uncertainty about Chairman Kim's imminent fate, the National Defense Commission should prove to be the steward of political and social stability in North Korea, since even Kim's successor will find it necessary to form a coalition with the Commission.

As long as the National Defense Commission maintains power, North Korea's nuclear policy should largely remain predictable because the new leadership, like Kim, will be driven by the requirements of national and regime security, followed by the needs of economic revitalization. Hence, the collective leadership of the military is likely to seek the resolution of the nuclear issue through the Six Party Talks if and when sufficient recognition and incentives are offered, and the other parties honor the negotiating principle of 'action for action.'

It thus seems unduly risky to escalate military pressure on the North with actions such as the upgrading of the Plan 5029, an aggressive move that will only stiffen the hard-line stance of North Korea and invite hostile reaction from China. China, in particular, is vital to ensuring stability in the North and alone among major regional players has attempted to develop an open line of communication with North Korea to influence its decision-making.

Uncertainty regarding North Korea should not become an excuse for panic and excessive reactions. Rather than risking all of the negotiating gains made with North Korea thus far by provocative

speculation, the international community should resume the calm, prudent and incremental approach it has more recently adopted in engaging the North, above all, by sustaining the Six Party Talks. Reducing uncertainty and enhancing stability in North Korea will be more rewarding than wishful thinking about its future implosion which can lead to serious calamities on the Korean peninsula and in the region as a whole.

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