



Policy Forum 08-073: Kim Jong-il on Spotlight



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Kim Jong-il on Spotlight

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By Tong Kim

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I. Introduction

Tong Kim, Research Professor with Ilmin Institute of International Relations at Korea University and an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University SAIS, writes, "One thing that the experience of the reports on Kim's health issue reminds us is the realization of how little we know about North Korea's leadership. The past decade of engaging the North has enabled the South to learn more about North Koreans. In this context, it is more imperative now to resume inter-Korean dialogue."

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II. Article by Tong Kim

- "Kim Jong-il on Spotlight"

By Tong Kim

Pyongyang's pronouncement of September 19 that it has begun reassembling plutonium production facilities and no longer wishes to be removed from the U.S. list of terrorism sponsors has created a new setback to the prospect of denuclearization. It also proves that at this point Kim Jong-il is firmly in control of his government, making the tough decision to reject international verification of Pyongyang's nuclear declaration.

Kim Jong-il seems to have made up his mind in mid-August following Bush's visit to Seoul and the subsequent U.S. deferral of delisting to forgo further progress on denuclearization and to wait until after the American presidential election. In a foreign ministry statement of Aug. 26, North Korea said it had suspended disablement and "would consider" rebuilding its disabled nuclear facilities at Yongpyon.

A recent flurry of press reports regarding Kim Jong-il's ill health raised concern about the stability of the North Korean regime, prompting a guessing game of who will be his successor and a discussion of what to do in the event of a North Korean collapse. It did not take long to see how hastily and rashly the media and government were overreacting to the unconfirmed reports.

The thrust of the reports was that the North Korean leader had suffered a stroke and received surgery from foreign doctors. Most of the reports on Kim's condition were unsubstantiated or speculative, relying on vague intelligence sources in Beijing, Seoul and Washington. It all started with Kim Jong-il's conspicuous absence from North Korea's 60th anniversary ceremony. The wildest story reported said that the North Korean leader had died months before and that his public role was being fulfilled by a look-alike. However, if true, why was the look-alike not seen at the ceremony?

President Lee Myung-bak even called an emergency Blue House staff meeting to evaluate the significance of the emerging information. Afterwards the Blue House said that the North Korean leader did not seem to be in a serious condition and seemed still able to manage his work, while the director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) told the National Assembly that Kim Jong-il had brain-related surgery last month, but was recovering, and well enough to ``rinse his mouth and to stand with assistance."

The last part of the NIS assessment had a credibility problem: It did not look like corroborated, actionable intelligence. The public discussion of unconfirmed intelligence matters was quickly criticized as a lack of prudence in dealing with a sensitive issue that could affect the national security interests of South Korea.

Belatedly, the Unification Ministry said it had no confirmed information regarding Kim Jong-il's health condition, with a warning that public discussion of his illness could further complicate already strained inter-Korean relations.

After watching a few cycles of unconfirmed reports and speculation, it seems safe to believe that the North Korean leader, known to have a history of heart disease and diabetes, recently had a serious health setback. Supporting circumstantial evidence for this assessment are the verifiable visits of foreign physicians, including Chinese, French, and German doctors. But it is still not clear which doctor or doctors actually had access to the North Korean leader or who performed the "brain-related surgery." None are talking.

In the meantime in Pyongyang, Kim Yong-nam, nominal head of the DPRK, told the Kyoto News that his "dear general" was fine, and a ranking foreign ministry official said that reports of the leader's health were a "conspiracy plot." The Chosun Shinbo, a pro-North Korean publication in Japan often speaking for Pyongyang, said Kim's no-show at his country's militia parade was not a surprise: "The supreme leader's activities were not made public for a period of time in the past whenever confrontation with the United States was intensified and tensions heightened on the Korean Peninsula."

As for succession prospects, there are basically two views: First, many specialists believe a post-Kim Jong-il North Korea will be ruled by a collective leadership that will emerge among military generals. On the other hand some predict it is the Workers Party that will likely succeed Kim. It is also possible to think of a military-party coalition leadership.

Those who support the theory of a collective leadership do not exclude the possibility that an ambitious man could emerge from the military group to fill Kim Jong-il's shoes, given the North's tradition of supporting a single national leader. Collective leadership has no successful precedence in the Korean history of national governance.

The other view still holds that Kim Jong-il will be succeeded by one of his three sons - Jong-nam, Jong-chul or Jong-un, of whom Jong-chul has been widely regarded as Kim Jong-il's favorite and a possible "crown prince" to succeed his throne. Throughout the Korean dynasties, nepotism was a strong ingredient to gaining power, and in view of the dynastic nature of the North Korean system, a second father-to-son succession is still possible. In this case, powerful military and party leaders will vie for influence on a young ruler, as they did when Kim Jong-il took over from his father.

Jong-nam, the oldest of the three, spends most of his time in China, but is favored by Jang Sung-taek, husband of Kim Jong-il's younger sister, and could get China's backing in the event of a power struggle following the death of Kim Jong-il. A former insider of Pyongyang's power system views China's role as a determining factor for a post-Kim Jong-il North Korea.

However, Kim Jong-il's death, whenever it comes, as it comes to every human being, will not lead to an automatic collapse of North Korea from within. The military generals and party cadre surrounding him are all in the same boat, and one none would easily disembark from. Trust and loyalty constitute the backbone of their Confucian belief system.

Seoul's talk of readiness for an implosion may purport to design a necessary contingency plan, as the South should be prepared for any possible development. But this should be done in secret. Open talk of upgrading the so-called "conceptual plan 5029" to "operations plan 5029" that would project combined U.S.-Korea forces into what is now North Korean territory would face several complicated - political, legal and diplomatic - difficulties, that the U.S.-ROK alliance would not be able to resolve without cooperation of the surrounding powers, especially that of China.

If U.S. forces were to enter North Korea, even for the limited purpose of securing its nuclear stockpile and keep it from falling into the hands of a third party, there has been a broad consensus among experts of the region that China would also likely intervene militarily. Chinese troops have already been deployed along the boarder line above the Yalu River probably for a dual objective; to stop a massive influx of refugees into China and to protect its strategic interest in North Korea.

One thing that the experience of the reports on Kim's health issue reminds us is the realization of how little we know about North Korea's leadership. The past decade of engaging the North has enabled the South to learn more about North Koreans. In this context, it is more imperative now to resume inter-Korean dialogue. What's your take?

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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