

Policy Forum 11-43: Kim Jong Il's Death Suggests Continuity Plus Opportunity to Engage



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By Peter Hayes, Scott Bruce, and David von Hippel

December 19, 2011

Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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I. Introduction



Photo: Reuters

Peter Hayes, Scott Bruce, and David von Hippel of the Nautilus Institute, write, “Ironically, Kim Jong Il’s death may make Korea the land of the morning calm for at least a year, during which political transitions will also occur in China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United States... Unless Kim Jong Un throws the nuclear strategy out the window and starts again, the outlines of the engagement agenda are already clear—send the North Koreans energy and food aid to meet both short-term humanitarian and medium/long-term development needs, help them build a safe small light water reactor, and bring them into an international enrichment consortium that would lead them to reveal the sum total of their enrichment program.”

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II. Nautilus Institute Report

-“Kim Jong Il’s Death Suggests Continuity Plus Opportunity to Engage”

By Peter Hayes, Scott Bruce, and David von Hippel

When North Korean leader and founding father Kim Il Sung died in July 1994, his son Kim Jong Il had held the reins of power since he was anointed in 1981—for 15 years. Kim Jong Il only took over fully in 1994 because his father dropped dead, having just reached over his shoulder to take back the reins in order to meet with President Jimmy Carter, to make a deal that averted a head-on collision with the United States over the North’s nuclear program at Yongbyon. The problem with Kim Jong Il dying during an “on the spot guidance” on December 17—as announced today by the North Korean official media on December 19 at 1830—is that not much is known about his third son and designated 27 year old successor, Kim Jong Un. Indeed, he has as only ever appeared in public accompanied by his father after nearly 14 months in the limelight. Moreover, he has had only one year, not 15, to prepare for leadership although his grooming clearly began in 2008. His rise to power is far more abrupt than his father who was withdrawn from public view for 3 years after 1981.

Kim Jung-Un is said to have studied in Switzerland, he reportedly speaks English and German, and spent time training in the artillery command of the Korean People’s Army before his rapid ascension to four star General and membership of the Central Military Commission—the voice of leadership when it comes to setting the party and military line on critical issues at key junctures, especially in

confrontations with external powers.

Before he died, Kim Jong Il had also strengthened the courtly power of his clan, by promoting his sister and her husband to create, with Kim Jong Un, a triumvirate with which to continue the dynastic succession.

Kim Jong Un's skills as a decisive leader, his charismatic ability to mobilize and motivate people, and his skill at manipulating the many levers of power and control in the DPRK's pyramid of power, however, all remain untested, at least insofar as those outside the DPRK can determine.

Kim Jong-Un did not accompany Kim Jong-Il in his May 2011 visit to China, now the DPRK's main geopolitical and economic backer, although he did meet him at the border upon return, thereby linking his stature to that of his father. Kim Jong-Un did, however, meet with a high level PLA delegation in Pyongyang on October 25, 2010 led by Colonel General Guo Boxiong, PRC Central Military Vice Chairman. At that time, Guo gave to him a framed calligraphy that read in Chinese: "In the Same Strain"—an obvious reference to Kim Il Sung and a blessing from the Chinese military of his succession.

This emblem of support from the military, plus the observation of China's heavy economic investment in recent years in the physical infrastructure of North Korea in order to extract resources (chiefly coal, iron ore, and other minerals) at relatively low prices from the DPRK, suggests that China will continue to back the Kim regime under the Kim Jong Un. China's decisive strategic support after the two major confrontations between the DPRK and South Korea—in March when the ROK warship Cheonan was sunk, almost certainly by the North; and November, when the North shelled Yeonpyeong Island and killed not only soldiers, but civilians for the first time since the Korean Armistice stilled the guns in 1953—is another indicator that China's support is likely to persist.

Now, in addition to the national celebrations of the 100th year of Kim Il Sung's birthday in 2012, the new leader must steer the DPRK through a long period of mourning for Kim Jong Il, while focusing on improving the domestic economy.

Here, the generational factor may make a major difference to the style of decision-making, and the relative decentralization of power in the DPRK. Already, political scientists have noted that North Korea shifted from one-man, totalitarian leadership in the person of Kim Il Sung, to a more technocratic style called authoritarian pluralism under Kim Jong Il, where he let the agencies of state—basically the military, the cabinet representing the economic line agencies, and the foreign affairs ministry—articulate different policy options—and then he would make a decisive move that set the cast.

Nowhere was this more evident than on the nuclear issue when, at the most tense moments, the pronouncements and results of decisions by the National Defense Commission would boom forth in ways that settled debates and set the line to follow.

However, the gerontocrats who lived through the Korea War are almost all gone; the next generation of senior leaders—the forty five to sixty year old North Koreans in senior party, military, and economic positions of power—are remarkably well-educated and often well-informed about the DPRK's relative and absolute backwardness. These people are connected by family, school, and university networks. They number perhaps 5,000 key people in leadership positions, and overall, perhaps 100,000 including dependent kin. They watch each other's backs, and enjoy a privileged, albeit spartan lifestyle, compared to their hungry compatriots.

Many of them are well travelled and even cosmopolitan, not unlike their South Korean counterparts,

and understand the need for massive and structural change to their economy and polity. However, they also understand that too rapid a change could lead to chaos and disaster, so they are cautious and know what a weak hand they have to play, both against the politically conservative and socially influential military, and against the South and its many allies, especially the United States.

As a stunning example of the leading edge of this structural change, today more than 800,000 North Koreans have cell phones—grown from a few tens of thousands in just two or three years, and far more than can be monitored individually and centrally, as was the practice in the good old days of totalitarian surveillance of all telecommunications. In the midst of its deprivation, the DPRK was in this respect, at least, busy building the foundations of a middle class, and sought to use its nuclear weapons as a way to compel external powers to assist it economically. Kim Jong Un is likely even more conversant than this new generation of senior leaders with the Internet and networked information economies, and therefore, likely to be more open to rapid, structural change in the economy. Whether he can bring along his senior advisors in embracing the notion of structural change is another matter—but for once, time is on his side, and he can press for change knowing that domestic and international forces will likely support him in the search for resolution of the nuclear issue.

Initially, Kim Jong Un and his senior advisors are likely to seek continuity with the past as the basis for smooth sailing in 2012 while they concentrate on domestic issues. Thus, they will emphasize their relationships with China; they will continue to talk about re-engaging in the Six Party Talks on the nuclear issue, but are unlikely to actually participate given the need for clear policy lines to be articulated at the Talks; and they will avoid provocations at the DMZ in 2012 to channel the political and emotional mobilization associated with the mourning of Kim Jong Il's passing to merge into support for Kim Jong Un's leadership.

Ironically, Kim Jong Il's death may make Korea the land of the morning calm for at least a year, during which political transitions will also occur in China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Far from a "Korean Spring" led by 27-year-old revolutionaries, while the process of domestic change has begun in the DPRK at the very top and may prove to be just as irresistible as in the Arab world, the transition is likely to start quietly.

Of course, it is possible to envision bleaker outcomes. One is a struggle within the Kim clique. Another is division within the center and provincial military leaderships if the 3rd Kim coming to power results in paralysis of central decision-making. Chaos in mid-winter could result in a major humanitarian crisis. The military might object to diplomatic moves to trade-away nuclear weapons in return for little more than some fuel and surplus corn from America.

In part to avoid these possibilities, but also to exploit the new space that Kim Jong Un may open up, it is important to prepare for a window of opportunity to re-engage the DPRK on the nuclear issue under its new, untried leadership in early 2013. Unless Kim Jong Un throws the nuclear strategy out the window and starts again, the outlines of this engagement agenda are already clear—send the North Koreans energy and food aid to meet both short-term humanitarian and medium/long-term development needs, help them build a safe small light water reactor, and bring them into an international enrichment consortium that would lead them to reveal the sum total of their enrichment program.

III. Nautilus invites your responsesThe Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit

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