

Policy Forum 11-002: North Korea's Succession May Go Smoothly After All

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By Brent Choi and Mi Jeong Hibbitts
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I. Introduction

Brent Choi and Mi Jeong Hibbitts, Washington-based specialists in North Korean issues, write, "It is possible that we will see the young Kim emerge as the next leader of North Korea. This possibility may drive Washington and Seoul to ponder new political options rather than continue current policy toward North Korea...The two allies should prepare for a scenario in which Kim Jong Un will indeed make it as regime leader, as much as for the contingencies in the case that he fails."

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II. Article by Brent Choi and Mi Jeong Hibbitts

-“North Korea’s Succession May Go Smoothly After All”

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A Million-Dollar Question

Kim Jong Un made his public debut as Kim Jong Il’s apparent successor during the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) meeting of party representatives in Pyongyang last September. Kim Jong Il’s youngest son was appointed four-star general in the Korean People’s Army (KPA), vice chairman of the WPK’s Central Military Commission, and member of the WPK Central Committee. With these actions, Kim Jong Il has set the stage for his son to become the next leader of the secretive communist country. Pyongyang’s first public confirmation of Kim Jong Un’s role appears to confirm that Kim Jong Un indeed will succeed his ailing father.

Now, here is the million-dollar question with regard to the sudden rise of Kim Jong Un: Will this plump and sullen 20-something son of Kim Jong Il be able to rise to his father’s throne in North Korea?

Odds against Kim Jong Un

Certainly, Kim Jong Un has a lot going against him. Young age, lack of military experience, and lack of distinct achievements are clearly the main weaknesses of Kim Jong Un in the succession process. And of course there is North Korea’s dire economic situation. Many North Korea experts in Washington point out that the state of the country’s economy may be an obstacle to the young Kim’s smooth succession.^[1]

However, if we look at each of the problems facing Kim Jong Un more carefully, we will find that they are not insurmountable. First, Kim Jong Un has substantial political assets. After all, his father is Kim Jong Il, the most powerful man in the country. And, developments in Pyongyang over the last two years appear to indicate that North Korea may have been preparing Kim Jong Un’s succession for quite some time, with a well thought-out plan, time table, and plausible political scenarios. Second, the significance of North Korea’s troubled economy should not be overstated. Although the political challenge presented by the North Korean economy is a serious challenge, one must not overlook the important fact that North Korean society is fundamentally different from those of the United States or South Korea, where presidents’ approval ratings plummet as the result of poor economic performance. Of course, it would have been ideal for the young Kim Jong Un if an economic vision or blue print, such as a seven-year development plan, had been announced at last month’s WPK meeting. However, more than producing an economic plan, what North Koreans desperately want their government to do is nothing more than to simply stop cracking down on free trade at markets. North Korea’s current economic situation is not terribly bad by their own standards. The food supply has never been sufficient in North Korea, but the situation is better than during “the Arduous March” of the late 1990s, a dark period of famine and hardship in North Korea. More importantly, China, North Korea’s most important ally, not only continues to provide oil and food, but also invests in its impoverished neighbor to ensure the country will not collapse economically.^[2]

Structural and Personnel Changes offer Insights

No one can know with absolute certainty whether Kim Jong Un will make it to the throne. However, by taking a careful look at the structural and personnel changes in the political institutions resulting from the WPK conference—the first in 44 years—outsiders can gain valuable insights to gauge

whether North Korea will be able to pull off a smooth transfer of power to Kim Jong Un. North Korea's unique political system is unlike any other in the world. The country is ruled under one man, Kim Jong Il, whose power is based on three political entities: the party, the cabinet, and the military. Controlling these three "branches" of the North Korean government greatly increases the odds of success in any venture.

The Workers' Party has been the ruling party of North Korea and the most powerful of these three branches through the end of the 20th century. However, by the end of the 1990s, as a result of Kim Jong Il taking over the reins of government, the distribution of power dramatically shifted. While the traditional power-sharing ratio among the three branches (party:cabinet:military) was 2:1:1, it became closer to 0.5:0.5:2 under Kim Jong Il—all thanks to the Dear Leader's "Military First Policy," or "Songun." With the adoption of "Songun" philosophy, the military became the most important state organ and was granted priority treatment. Accordingly, almost all major policy decisions has been delegated to the powerful National Defense Commission rather than the Worker's Party. Ironically, the disproportionately-strong military that Kim Jong Il created has appeared to potentially undermine his desired transition of power to his son. However, by shifting the distribution of power to place the military and WPK at a more equal footing, so that neither has an intrinsic upper hand over the other, both the military and party would have to vie for power—making it easier for an inexperienced leader like Kim Jong Un to maintain control over both.

And here, Kim Jong Il demonstrated that while he may be physically lame, he is no lame duck. At the September 28 WPK conference, Kim Jong Il re-shifted the balance of power from a military-led uni-polar system to a dual system restoring the WPK's power as an equal that of the military. While North Korea watchers have paid close attention to signs of tension between the military and the ruling party as the new authority, no such signs have yet surfaced.

How did Kim Jong Il accomplish this internal power-shift? It appears that he had to dish out favors to powerful party members and military elites to restore the party's power while avoiding potential conflicts with the military. He installed high-ranking generals into the party. He placed several local party leaders and elderly cabinet members into lofty party positions as well, with the intention of making them compete in showing their allegiance to the Dear Leader.

The outcome is a "mixing bowl" of flavors in which no one flavor dominates. The WPK regained power at least on the surface, but was "militarized." The boundary between the military and WPK has become considerably blurred, with overlapping positions. Thus, while major players were appeased by promotion to high positions, no one has gained significant power over another, and as the two major institutions within the leadership, the party and military can now exercise some level of influence over each other.

Pivotal Players in Succession: Ri Yong Ho and Kim Kyong Hee

To better understand how this transition occurred and to make a reasonable guess of who the new major political players are in North Korea, we can gain some insights from details in the personnel reshuffle at the recent party representatives' meeting.^[3] Besides the presumed heir Kim Jong Un, there are two people who grab our attention: Ri Yong Ho, Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, and Kim Kyong Ok, First Vice Director of the WPK's Organization Guidance Department.

Ri Yong Ho and Kim Kyong Ok were both appointed to the Party's Central Military Commission along with Kim Jong Un. This indicates that the junior Kim has reached the first major milestone to running the military, since North Korea's military is controlled by two political bodies: the General Staff of the KPA and WPK, headed by Ri Yong Ho and Kim Kyong Ok respectively. Therefore, it is likely that Kim Jong Un, who was appointed vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (along with Ri Yong Ho), will be able to increase his influence in the military through Ri Yong Ho and Kim Kyong Ok. From such a position, Kim Jong Un can influence the hiring and appointments of field grade officers, and also make more senior military officials in their 50s and 60s show their allegiance to him by using "carrots" such as promotions and hopeful promises.

However, we should pay particularly close attention to the rise of Vice Marshal Ri Yong Ho. The

extraordinary rise of Ri, who turned 68 this year, is also marked by his appointment to the Politburo presidium, of which there are only five members.[4] This means that Ri is at the axis of the three power bases: the military, the party's Central Military Commission, and the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau. Therefore, Ri will likely play a pivotal role in paving the path forward for Kim Jong Un over the next two to three years as he transitions to become Kim Jong Il's successor.[5]

Additional Resources Available to Kim Jong Un

For Kim Jong Un, who has never served in the military, it will not be easy to earn the respect and loyalty from powerful old veteran generals who fought alongside his grandfather, Kim Il Sung--the most revered and god-like figure in North Korea. It must be noted that in North Korea, generals don't retire or even fade away: once a general, forever a general until death in this militarized country. Thus, in order to make these powerful men support him, the young Kim needs help from someone with credibility.

Kim Jong Un has several potential resources supporting his transition to power. For instance, he may choose to lure the senior elite generals to his side with the assistance of Kim Kyong Hee, his aunt and Kim Il Sung's daughter. He may also turn to Choi Ryong Hae, a close family aide, to cajole these generals for their support.[6] One can envision how crucial a role Kim Kyong Hee could play in solidifying Kim Jong Un's succession. It is possible to imagine how aunt Kim Kyong Hee, recently promoted to four-star general at the WPK conference, could persuade these senior generals in her new capacity, accompanying her nephew Kim Jong Un with baskets of rice cakes, bottles of wine, fresh fruits, and fat envelopes full of U.S. dollars. While hobnobbing with these old generals talking about having spent the good old days with Kim Il Sung, she will ask for their favors to help the young grandson of Kim Il Sung transition to power. How would the generals be able to refuse this personal request of the daughter of Kim Il Sung? It wouldn't be too wild a speculation that Kim Jong Un will be able to garner the support of North Korea's established military elite.

Kim Jong Un's Fair Chance at Success

So, will Kim Jong Un eventually make it to the throne after all? Despite our initial doubts, after recent events unfolding from the WPK meeting, the young successor has a pretty good chance of achieving his goal. The three power bases of North Korea--the party, cabinet, and military--pursue mutual interests. They have become, in a way, a "community of interests" by standing in line with Kim Jong Un. Simply put, succession to Kim Jong Un maximizes their benefits both politically and individually. In addition, at this point, any chance for a coup is pretty much out of question--not when the party, cabinet and military have overlapping roles and personnel. For a coup to be successful, those involved would have to keep it secret until they strike a destructive blow to the existing administration, an extremely difficult task in North Korea where surveillance and intelligence are two or three-fold in all entities. Kim Jong Un's success would also satisfy individual interests in the three power entities. Why would they, North Korea's upper class, bother to usurp things when Kim Jong Un's succession will ensure them their lofty government position, endless food supplies, and other benefits for the rest of their lives? In sum, the elements supporting Kim Jong Un's path to the throne appear much greater than those obstructing his path. [7]

However, this doesn't mean that Kim Jong Un's path to the throne will only be smooth. For example, how would North Koreans think if they find out that Kim Jong Un's mother Ko Yong Hee was a Japanese-born ethnic Korean and dancer at Mansudae Art Troupe in North Korea, where those who are of Japanese descent are treated very poorly. Ko Yong Hee is also known as either Kim Jong Il's wife or mistress. Even if kept quiet for now, these issues might weigh on Kim Jong Un's legitimacy down the road.

Other factors beyond the control of the regime could cause problems for a smooth succession. Another major natural disaster like the floods in the Sinuiju area this year would be a potential obstacle. We also cannot exclude the possibility of internal clashes over an open or closed-door policy, and relations with the United States, between elite cabinet members familiar with the outside world and hard-liners in the party and the military. However, these issues are likely to be dealt with

under the surface, and do not appear as major hurdles to the succession process. Thus, by far, the most important variable for Kim Jong Un's succession is the health of his father, Kim Jong Il. Despite what appears to be a relatively smooth succession process so far, a power struggle after Kim Jong Il's death is not outside the realm of possibility. For instance, if we suppose Kim Jong Il dies within two or three years, his brother-in-law Jang Sung Taek, vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and second in command over other top military figures, may attempt to push the young Kim aside to take over the Stalinist state.^[8] But it does appear that Kim Jong Il and others in key positions have thought about how to address this plausible scenario. The fact that Jang Sung Taek was given candidate member status in the Politburo of the party Central Committee and not member status, and only member status in the Central Military Commission, limits his power under Kim Jong Un and reflects Kim Jong Il's shrewdness.

Washington and Seoul need to prepare for Kim Jung Un's North Korea

It is possible that we will see the young Kim emerge as the next leader of North Korea. This possibility may drive Washington and Seoul to ponder new political options rather than continue current policy toward North Korea. Washington and Seoul are calling for nuclear disarmament first as a prerequisite for improving relations with North Korea, while the defiant North Korea continues to rebuff the call. The two allies should prepare for a scenario in which Kim Jong Un will indeed make it as regime leader, as much as for the contingencies in the case that he fails.

III. Citations

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IV. Nautilus invites your responses

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