

Policy Forum 11-45: Nothing Succeeds Like Succession: Chinese Language Perspectives on Kim Jong-Un's Transition to Power



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By Roger Cavazos

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I. Introduction

Roger Cavazos, a Nautilus Institute Associate and consultant on North-East Asia, writes, “The breathtakingly short timeline of announcement of Kim Jong-Il’s death, DPRK announcing Kim Jong-Un as the successor, China affirming and also providing their guidance to 'maintain stability on the peninsula' and the DPRK to responding via Chinese-language press on KCNA indicates that while the specific timing may have been a surprise, the basic outline of the leadership transition had been worked out long ago...For the sake of the Korean people on both sides of the DMZ and regional stability, all sides should use the early indicators of a relatively calm environment to engage in discussions, clarify intentions, and plan basic outlines of responses if things do not continue on a positive trend beyond the short term.”

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II. Report by Roger Cavazos

-“Nothing Succeeds Like Succession: Chinese Language Perspectives on Kim Jong-Un’s Transition to Power”

by Roger Cavazos

Chinese language, web-based news services and more or less official websites including People’s Daily Online, Xinhuanet, the Communist Party of China, and the Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang have clearly and consistently carried the same respond to the death of Kim Jong-Il: China offers condolences; Kim Jong-Un (KJU) is in charge in North Korea; maintaining peace and stability on the (Korean) Peninsula is important.[\[1\]](#) China expects (read: wants) a smooth and orderly transition to maintain peace and stability. Unstated, but fairly obvious given the context of world affairs, is that China wants to continue to focus on several upcoming key elections and leadership transitions in the PRC. There is one area of tension which has not been addressed: The U.S. is concerned about the DPRK’s nuclear C3I (Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence) while China and the DPRK are concerned about U.S. and ROK intervention. However, there is almost no reporting to address those concerns in China. Chinese language press support the conclusions of the Nautilus Policy Forum issued immediately after the DPRK announced Kim Jong-Il’s (KJI) death, that is, the situation would likely be one of continuity with the possibility of change. [\[2\]](#)

All the online publications listed above share common phraseology and many common pictures. Kim Jong-Il’s death was off the front page within three to four days (except for the Chinese Embassy page) likely indicating that the Chinese assess their initial press plan had its intended effect of clarifying China’s position. DPRK press, mainly via the Chinese language version of the Korean Central News Agency, communicated back to Chinese that they had received the message and were rallying around Kim Jong-Un. [\[3\]](#)

The People’s Daily Online provides an entire section complete with a black and white banner on top to commemorate Kim Jong-Il. [\[4\]](#) Black and white are traditional mourning colors in China and Korea. The center column contains four major headings giving the essence of the Chinese reaction: “Hu Jintao Offers Condolences,” “Kim Jong-Un and Ranking Party Members Offer Condolences,” “China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Maintaining Peace and Stability on the (Korean) Peninsula is Everyone’s Common Interest,” and “Experts: DPRK Policy will not Change in the Short Term”. Each of the four headings has many sub headings, but the overarching construct is: China grieves with DPRK, Kim Jong-Un is in charge, keep the peace on the peninsula (a reminder to the ROK/US/Japan), and the DRPK should operate as normal in the “short term” - a necessarily ambiguous definition.

Xinhuanet dedicates several sections to different aspects of Kim Jong-Il's death and proceedings, but the most important (first listed) is "Kim Jong-Un and Ranking DPRK Officials Pay Respects to Kim Jong-Il." [5] With that simple statement as well as the pictorial stories, China shows who they back in the DPRK. In the very first picture of this particular series, Xinhua has a split picture: KJU with military representatives on his right and DPRK President Kim Yong Nam on his left. [6] This is likely meant to represent a nascent triumvirate. The other half of the picture is Kim Jong-Il with only military guards keeping watch. Part of the picture is an artifact since no one else would be allowed to stand in those other areas. However, the picture is also meant to show the Korean People's Army believes "Songun" or "Military First" policy will continue. This is another indicator of continuity, meant to emphasize to Chinese and international press (and presumably Chinese officials) that "maintaining peace and stability on the (Korean) Peninsula" is important.[7]

The Communist Party of China website also has a special banner for Hu Jintao's visit to Pyongyang's Embassy in Beijing.[8] The picture tells the story: Hu Jintao leads a delegation representing his triune powers: Party Secretary, Head of Government, and Head of the Military to pay respect to Kim Jong-Il and to show support for Kim Jong-Un.

The Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang (and other sites) carried the full text of the CPC leadership condolence telegram to the DPRK.[9] Everything in the telegram indicates formulaic, smooth and orderly transition.

Yet more indicators of continuity come from the composition of Kim Jong-Il's national funeral team. In 1994, Kim Jong-Il headed the National Funeral Committee for his father.[9] Kim Jong-Un has been named to head the National Funeral Committee for his father. The full list as published by KCNA has only a minor surprise - none of Kim Jong-Il's other children are listed in the official funeral party. [10]

There are no major additions or deletions to the funeral list which indicates a relatively stable power arrangement - and much prior agreement to not disturb the status quo in the short term. The list basically mirrors members and alternate members of the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee of the 3rd Party Conference, September 28, 2010.[11] However, in such a Confucian and patrilineal society, Kim Jong-Il's other progeny are not listed anywhere and could not be found via a Chinese language search for their names on People Daily or on Xinhuanet. Omitting the other offspring provides a straight and clean succession path from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong-Un.

KCNA on-line coverage only goes back to 1997 so there's no on-line record of the July 8, 1994 (Pyongyang time) death of Kim Il Sung. However, the verbiage from a 1994 New York Times story on the death of Kim Il Sung, which references DPRK reporting, used almost the same verbiage. [12] A Phoenix TV website captured pictures of North Koreans weeping in 1994 which are extremely similar to the national mourning seen today in North Korea and uses comparable language of "suffering a heart attack on his way to work inspections." [13] As an aside, news was broken in 1994 via radio and cathode ray tube TV in rare instances. This time, the message was often delivered via LED or Plasma displays. The New York Times article also captured other similarities: the number of days of mourning, excluding foreigners from the official mourning, and even the same number of prescribed horn blasts across the country. In short, everything's almost the same and provides yet more early indicators of a transition from Kim Jong-Il to Kim Jong-Un that will be as orderly as it was from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong-Il despite a very compressed timeline.

China's official press reported "the WPK Central Committee and Central Military Commission, DPRK National Defense Commission, Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly and Cabinet released a notice on Saturday informing the WPK members, service-persons and all other people of his passing away." [14] By publishing the article, it may indicate PRC displeasure at the surprise

announcement.[15] An alternative explanation is that they want to appear to be displeased to counter allegations China may have been tipped off early. There is speculation that China was informed the day that Kim Jong Il died.[16] It was a huge operational security success for the 23 million residents of DPRK who own a collective 1.1 million land lines and 700,000 cell phones to keep a secret for 50 hours.[17] Given that kind of operational security, it is no wonder there are no Chinese press reports (or even blogs) addressing who might control the DPRK's nuclear weapons right now. A better question is: what level of instability would likely draw outside responses?

The breathtakingly short timeline of announcement of Kim Jong-Il's death, DPRK announcing Kim Jong-Un as the successor, China affirming and also providing their guidance to "maintain stability on the peninsula" and the DPRK to responding via Chinese-language press on KCNA indicates that while the specific timing may have been a surprise, the basic outline of the leadership transition had been worked out long ago. The broad outlines are clear. Diving further into the details offers some additional insights, but only indicates changes on the margins, not fundamental or destabilizing changes in the "short term." For the sake of the Korean people on both sides of the DMZ and regional stability, all sides should use the early indicators of a relatively calm environment to engage in discussions, clarify intentions, and plan basic outlines of responses if things do not continue on a positive trend beyond the short term.

III. Citations

[1] NOTE: All Chinese to English translations and the one Korean to English translation are my own. Therefore any errors are also my own.

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IV. Nautilus invites your responses

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