

Policy Forum 08-074: Nothing Succeeds Like Succession?



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By Scott Thomas Bruce

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I. Introduction

Scott Thomas Bruce, Director of US Operations at the Nautilus Institute in San Francisco which is affiliated with the USF Center for the Pacific Rim, writes, "Removing North Korea from the list of terror sponsoring nations no longer offers a way forward... The Bush Administration could send one or both of George H. W. Bush and Jimmy Carter to meet with Kim Jong Il and put together the icebreaker... It would also make the overture bipartisan in US presidential politics, thereby signaling

the gravity with which the US views the situation in the DPRK. Incidentally, it would also force the DPRK leadership to produce Kim Jong Il or admit that he is in bad shape."

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II. Article by Scott Thomas Bruce

- "Nothing Succeeds Like Succession?"

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As interesting as speculation on the future of North Korea may be, the real issue remains the country's nuclear program. It is possible to end the country's ability to produce plutonium in a matter of months. Policy-makers in the U.S. and North Korea can either act now to make a decisive deal that will support the long-term interests of both countries or let the months of effort that have been invested into the nuclear deal go down as another in a long line of missed opportunities to improve security in North-east Asia.

The reports of Kim Jong-Il's stroke provoked a flurry of hypothetical scenarios as researchers and diplomats attempt to read the tea leaves in Pyongyang to determine exactly how sick the Dear Leader might be, and gaze into their crystal balls to predict who would take power after Kim. Some predict that Kim Jong-Il's eldest son will assume power, despite having fallen out of favor. Other analysts suggest that the death of Kim Jong-Il will be the end of dynastic succession in North Korea and an elite member of the state will assume power. Still others predict that China will act to install a PRC-friendly leader in the country. Another popular hypothesis is that a collective leadership of elites will take control of the state. The real answer is that no one, especially not the North Koreans, know who or what body will assume control of the country after Kim Jong-Il.

This lack of clarity is driving speculation about the situation in the North, and has heightened awareness of the security implications of a dramatic change in the already unstable regime. Not surprisingly, governments have begun to plan for the worst. The United States and China have allegedly begun talks on what a post-Kim Jong-Il North Korea would look like; South Korea and the US have dusted off the military scenario for a North Korean collapse and are revising it from a conceptual strategy to a focused, specific operational plan; and Japan has prepped contingency plans for evacuating Japanese citizens from the Korean peninsula and accommodating DPRK refugees.

The question of Kim Jong-Il's health and the issue of succession are indisputably dramatic, as they highlight the uncertain and tense relationship between the North and much of the rest of the world. However, speculation on the instability of the North Korean state is nothing new, and Kim Jong-Il's stroke may not be the most pressing issue for the country. Chinese and South Korean reports suggest that Kim is still in power and recovering relatively rapidly. While some American reports seem less confident, all credible sources agree that there is no internal power struggle taking place. The severe food shortages and rotting infrastructure present a threat to the security of the state that deserves at least as much concern as the issue of succession.

The chronic food shortage, with a quarter of the population in immediate need of immediate food aid, the skyrocketing price of rice due to low supply, and the increasing unrest stemming from these issues, indicate that the situation in North Korea today may be more perilous than at the peak of the floods and famine of the 1990s. The desperate need for food has led to lawlessness, including grain smuggling across the Chinese border and unrest in North Korean markets as officials try to tighten control of these areas. Reports about the DPRK energy infrastructure indicate that even in privileged

areas, the North may be one very cold day away from sections of the electric grid failing and leaving the population to freeze. While the Dear Leader's stroke is a significant event, it is only a symptom of the severe instability of the North Korean regime.

This uncertainty has been compounded by the collapse of near-détente that evolved between the U.S. and the North regarding a verification regime for North Korea's nuclear program, and the de-listing of the state from the U.S. list of terror sponsoring countries. Inspectors at Yongbyon completed eight out of eleven agreed disablement activities at the reactor site, and effectively arrested the country's ability to produce more plutonium. At this time, American inspectors have been expelled from the country; however, the North Koreans have announced their intention to restart the Yongbyon reactor and have asked the IAEA to remove the seals and disable surveillance equipment at the facility.

It is tempting to write this dispute up to North Korean posturing due to the illness of Kim Jong-Il. In reality, the dispute over North Korea's nuclear program is a dispute over the nuclear program, and not an attempt to cover-up internal problem within the DPRK. The North Koreans see the demands for verification as extra conditions to a pre-existing agreement in order to derail negotiations. They interpret demands for information about nuclear collaboration with Syria as a trap that will compel them to disclose data that will ultimately be used against them. Finally, they believe that allowing U.S. and IAEA officials to conduct on the spot inspections anywhere within the country to be a loss of sovereignty with which they cannot abide. While North Korea will certainly attempt to have its nuclear cake and eat it too, the terms that are proposed now will be very hard for the North to stomach.

On the U.S. side, the policy-makers in the Bush administration have just about lost their patience with the North. Pragmatists who considered a nuclear deal with the North to be the best of many bad options have been locked in a struggle with hardliners who see no point in good faith negotiations. After wining some leeway to pursue an agreement with the North, the breakdowns in the talks, the endless renegotiations over the terms of the agreement, and their own unfamiliarity with protracted North Korean negotiating style has wheedled away their patience with the DPRK until they are resigned to give up trying to make the agreement with the North work.

The situation with North Korea will not be resolved by the forthcoming U.S. elections. Both Senators McCain and Obama are committed to instituting a firm verification regime in the North. While Obama will continue the negotiations and may attempt to engage the North with more bilateral meetings, he will be under political pressure to prove himself tough on regimes like North Korea. McCain may withdraw from the Six Party Talks entirely if he feels that they are unproductive. He has indicated that he may consider side issues such as the Japanese abductees before removing the DPRK from the list of terror supporting countries. Despite eight years of missed opportunities and exchanges of hostile rhetoric, North Korea will get no better deal than what is on the table now from the Bush administration.

Despite these challenges, the benefits of a deal far outweigh negatives. While the short-term situation in North Korea is relatively stable, there is little long-term hope for the country unless it can fundamentally reorient its relations with the international community, in particular the U.S. The harvest will be dismal this year and the energy infrastructure of the country is decrepit and getting worse. Meanwhile, the North remains dependent on the less-than-benign influence of China. North Korea's best chance for survival is to barter its nuclear arsenal for aid and a transformed economic infrastructure, and to dilute the influence of the PRC by improving its relations with other nations.

In its fading weeks, the Bush administration can still achieve a significant foreign policy success by disabling the ability of the North to produce plutonium and laying the ground work for future U.S.

administrations, along with the other parties in the region, to barter away the North's nuclear arsenal. How would it do so? Removing North Korea from the list of terror sponsoring nations no longer offers a way forward. The DPRK declares that it no longer wants to be delisted. Moreover, it is no longer politically feasible for the US to implement this step. About the only step likely to get the DPRK leadership's attention is at the presidential level, because this reflects on the authority and power of Kim Jong Il. The Bush Administration could send one or both of George H. W. Bush and Jimmy Carter to meet with Kim Jong Il and put together the icebreaker. This would be reminiscent of the July 1994 meeting with Kim Il Sung at which time a deal was put together that met both parties fundamental interests. Having Carter along would make it impossible for Kim Jong Il to ignore the US overture, given Carter's link to his father. It would also make the overture bipartisan in US presidential politics, thereby signaling the gravity with which the US views the situation in the DPRK. Incidentally, it would also force the DPRK leadership to produce Kim Jong Il or admit that he is in bad shape.

The frantic speculation over the health of Kim Jong-Il is a reminder of the instability of the North Korean nuclear issue and the danger that a collapsing regime poses to itself and its neighbors. However, it is not succession that will guarantee the future of the North Korean state and resolve the security issues on the Korean peninsula but a resolution of the nuclear issue. An agreement on a verification regime that will ensure the fissile material in the North is accounted for in exchange for the removal of North Korea from the list of terror sponsoring nations that will eventually allow the country to access international development will be a significant step toward securing both North Korea and the region.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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

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