



Policy Forum 08-070: Preparing for Regime Change in North Korea: The Need for International Cooperation



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By Steve Noerper

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I. Introduction

Steve Noerper, Senior Fellow, Asia Pacific and Director, worldwide issue networks, for the EastWest

Institute, writes, "These challenges require considerable international coordination – a growth of efforts beyond the current denuclearization dialogue. The mandate of the Six-Party talks could be expanded to include other security and development questions. Participation in the talks could also be expanded to include contributors like Mongolia, Canada and Australia, and prove more effective by forming mini-laterals - groupings of two or three concerned nations - to tackle specific problem areas."

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II. Article by Steve Noerper

- "Preparing for Regime Change in North Korea: The Need for International Cooperation"

By Steve Noerper

When North Korean leader Kim Jong-il failed to appear at his country's 60th anniversary celebrations on September 9, his no-show generated global headlines. This was a major anniversary, and rumors about Kim's ill-health have been swirling for months. South Korean intelligence publicly reported that the North Korean leader suffered a stroke in mid-August and is recovering. Kim Young-nam, North Korea's second-highest official, dismissed concerns over Kim's health. The current speculation and ritual denials are eerily familiar to Kremlin-watchers of a generation ago, and everyone is asking the "what next for North Korea question." Though Kim himself might echo Mark Twain's suggestion that "reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated," the stakes are high and demand not only international attention, but also practical moves toward cooperation and coordination in the face of the uncertainties ahead. A rundown on the key issues:

1. Nuclear Control and Nuclear Safety. With its October 2006 nuclear test, North Korea demonstrated capability, however limited. Though recent U.S. and North Korean talks have focused on disclosure issues, the lack of a firm reading means that it is essential for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the participants in the Six Party talks process – Russia, the United States, Japan, China, and South and North Korea – to quickly ascertain what stockpiles exist and facilitate maximum safeguards against misuse or accident during a post-Kim transition period. The same applies for stockpiles of other Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), namely chemical and biological weapons.
2. Political Control. North Korea would see an active mourning period after Kim's passing. Since it is a country that has had only two leaders, father and son, over six decades, this will be an epochal event marked by lavish tributes to the fallen leader. Speculation will quickly focus on the jockeying for control among Kim family members—three sons and a daughter—and between them and a party and military cadre reportedly divided over the pace of reform. Whoever or whatever collective team emerges will raise the banner of Kim, but the atmosphere might echo confusion in China after Mao's passing and the rise of the Gang of Four. South Korea may have contingency planning to work with North Korean officials during such a transition period, but, if so, it's a well-kept secret. The time is right for coming to agreement on how to engage likely political players.
3. Refugees. The famines of a decade ago and economic uncertainty since have generated a swell of refugees into Northeast China. Word of Kim's passing could see North Koreans flock to their borders with China, Russia and South Korea and by sea to Japan. The specter of mass migrations of impoverished North Koreans to its neighbors – already challenged by global economic problems and food and energy concerns -- warrants careful and preemptive international dialogue.

4. Reunification and reconciliation. The tasks of reunification – economic management, jobs creation, the rebuilding of infrastructure, agricultural and environmental clean-up and development, demobilization and demilitarization – coupled with the heady challenge of social and cultural reconciliation can hardly be exaggerated. They warrant dialogue aimed at coordinating contingency planning. The integration of the two Koreas must be Korean-led, with international actors sensitive to Korean prescriptions and sharing the burden whenever possible. Unification will prove much harder and more costly than in Germany.

These challenges require considerable international coordination – a growth of efforts beyond the current denuclearization dialogue. The mandate of the Six-Party talks could be expanded to include other security and development questions. Participation in the talks could also be expanded to include contributors like Mongolia, Canada and Australia, and prove more effective by forming mini-laterals – groupings of two or three concerned nations – to tackle specific problem areas. In an area devoid of regional groupings like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or European Union (EU), cooperative efforts on North Korea will establish a protocol and process that provides Northeast Asia with a firmer multilateral foundation.

This coordination will flourish best when the powers converging around the Korean Peninsula – China, Russia, the United States and Japan – enjoy strong respective bilateral ties. Those ties are strong at the moment, with the worrying exception of the downward spiral in Russia-U.S. relations, made more acute by the Russia-Georgia conflict. Accordingly, encouraging Russia as a stronger partner in crafting solutions for the Korean Peninsula enhances relations on both the Pacific and Atlantic fronts. Six decades ago, Russia and the United States partitioned the Peninsula at the 38th Parallel; now it is time to heal that divide, and in the process mend Russia-U.S. ties as well.

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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