

Policy Forum 12-01: The DPRK Interregnum: Window of Opportunity for the International Community

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By Victor Hsu

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I. Introduction

[caption id="attachment_14784" align="alignleft" width="300" caption="Kim Jong-un walks alongside the body of his late father during last month's funeral procession. Source: AP"]



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Victor Hsu, a Visiting Professor at the Korea Development Institute School of Public Policy and Management, argues that the post funeral interregnum in the DPRK should be seen as a window of opportunity for moving North Korea's relationships in a constructive direction. To do this, Hsu suggests that the international community network and create a coordinated engagement plan that avoids duplication, maximizes the increasingly scarce resources among traditional donors and gathers lessons learned for future engagement. Donors could facilitate this work by supporting civil society knowledge-sharing efforts with the DPRK, which is more sustainable and less susceptible to the vicissitudes of inter-state relations.

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II. Report by Victor Hsu

-“The DPRK Interregnum: Window of Opportunity for the International Community”
by Victor Hsu

Now that the funeral of Kim Jong Il is over, it is time for the international community to explore avenues of engaging with the DPRK, rather than trying to read the tea leaves about who is in charge or whether Kim Jong Un is the real Supreme Leader and Military Commander. This period presents a window of opportunity either to engage constructively or to destabilize the Korean peninsula. It is truly a time of danger and opportunity. While it is legitimate to expect the DPRK to take the first step, there is an equal onus on the international community to adopt policies and strategies to encourage the DPRK to initiate a new chapter in its foreign policy. However, this post funeral interregnum may be ironically the right time for the “strategic patience” policy of the Obama’s administration.

First, it is important to bear in mind that following precedent is a basic rule of engagement on the part of the DPRK. It was a full three years before Kim Jong Il emerged to lead the country following Kim Il Sung’s unexpected death. There is no reason for the DPRK not to observe a similar period of prolonged national mourning. Of course, next year is the 100th anniversary of the birth of the eternal President, Kim Il Sung. The celebration is likely to proceed in April. Moreover, to use a term often employed by the DPRK to describe the success of Kim Il Sung and the DPRK heroes, the “exploits” of the Dear Leader will be extolled and given more prominence than if he were still alive. This is already evident from the DPRK’s annual New Year’s Editorial which has heaped high praise on the accomplishments of Kim Jong Il.

Second, the confirmation of Kim Jong Un as the “supreme leader and commander” is to be expected. Anything else would be a real surprise and would warrant speculation and analysis. For analysts keen to spot fissures in the leadership of the DPRK, perhaps the sole speculation that can be made is

a possible vacuum in the decision-making process. Kim Jong Un is unlikely to take bold unilateral actions unless his position or his family is threatened. In fact, he may even welcome a prolonged period of national celebration of his father and grandfather.

It is unrealistic to expect dramatic policy reversal or new initiatives for the foreseeable future. If anything, it will be business as usual unless the leadership is forced or provoked into taking action.

Therefore, in the near term, the international community should:

1. Avoid taking actions that will force the DPRK to make premature decisions.
2. Respond to the DPRK should the invitation be extended to resume existing negotiations.

This past week, newspaper editorials noted the absence of commentary on the DPRK nuclear program in the New Year Joint Editorial and questioned the DPRK's motivation. In fact, keeping silent on controversial issues is part of the DPRK's diplomatic brinkmanship and has been the DPRK's signature negotiation tool.

Third, following precedent, the DPRK is likely to resume existing formal or back channel talks and honor existing commitments, be it the 6-party talks or a new round of food/nutrition aid from the US government, or the joint ventures in Kaesong or tours to Mount Kumgang by South Koreans. The Joint Editorial contains ample indications about DPRK's desire to be a "thriving country," with a "knowledge-based economy." There are repeated references to "achieving prosperity" with world standards. For 2012, it talks about

"the important task of scaling without fail the historical-stage targets... true to the lifetime instructions of General Kim Jong Il. By registering a brilliant success in this year's struggle for opening the gates of a thriving country, we must enter a new, high stage of building a thriving socialist country in an all-round way."

Therefore, for example, "light industries" should be a "modern base" to produce "larger quality goods" that "cater to people's tastes" and are "welcomed" by them. Equally significant is the highlighting of solving the food problem as a "burning issue" and the pathway to prosperity.

In order for the DPRK to become "a thriving nation," the technocrats and sectoral professionals, will have to play a pivotal role. Ideology, alone, cannot feed the people or achieve prosperity. To quote from the Joint Editorial, the professionals with technical know-how and expertise will have to ensure that:

1. "Farming materials and machinery needed" "hit the target for agricultural production."
2. "Modern bases for stockbreeding and poultry farming and large-size fruit and fish farms" lead to "the improvement of people's living standards, run at full capacity."
3. Continue the construction of large hydropower stations, thermal powered mining, metallurgy, and upgrade railroads, and chemical industries.
4. Guide scientific research to develop "core, basic technologies, including information and nano technologies and bioengineering, and promote technical engineering in major fields and produce more research findings that would beat the world."

In short, "all sectors and units of the national economy should drastically increase the capacity for developing new technologies and products of their own, and push forward in a far-sighted way the

work of turning the national economy into a technology-intensive one.” Hence, “*talents in the field of science and technology,*” are “*precious assets of the country,*” to be “*given prominence and the conditions for their scientific research should be provided at the highest standard.*”

The challenges that the Joint Editorial laid out for 2012 are formidable. But the contours of a roadmap to its economic prosperity are clearly laid out. To date, governments in North America and the European Union have refused to engage the DPRK in any form of assistance other than humanitarian aid. The technocrats within the DPRK will not be able to accomplish their mandate without technical upgrade, inputs and resources.

Interestingly, NGOs such as Adventist Disaster Response Agency, American Friends Service Committee, Christian Friends of Korea, Eugene Bell Foundation, German Agro-Action, Global Resources Services, Mercy Corps, Samaritan’s Purse, Save the Children UK, and World Vision have had fruitful partnerships with the DPRK in projects that address organic farming, upgrading of clinics and hospitals, livestock, food aid, vegetable and fruit fertigation and renewable energy. These are helpful knowledge sharing activities seen by the DPRK to be particularly valuable.

This post funeral interregnum in the DPRK should be seen as a window of opportunity for moving its relationships in a constructive direction. The international community should take time to network and to plan a coordinated engagement at multiple levels such as exchange visits, knowledge sharing activities, and other confidence building measures. A coordinated plan is necessary to avoid duplication, to maximize the increasingly scarce resources among traditional donors and to gather the lessons learned for follow-up. Donors should facilitate this networking by supporting civil society knowledge-sharing efforts. Civil society access is more sustainable and is less susceptible to the vicissitudes of inter-state relations, as the history of NGO involvement there has amply demonstrated. If NGO involvement has decreased in recent years it is in large measure due to decreased donor funding.

It is also time for the international community to consider the implications of the existing UN sanctions which have not been effective and are perceived mainly as a political exercise by states with few options to punish the DPRK’s nuclear program. It should also ask itself whether the relationship with the DPRK should be dictated by, and solely confined to, the now highly contentious nuclear and human rights issues. Countries not involved in the 6-party negotiations, such as those in the EU, should encourage the broadening of the engagement agenda with the DPRK to include confidence building measures.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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