

# Policy Forum 12-04: The DPRK: Uncertain but More Hopeful



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By Shen Dingli

February 7, 2012

Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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### I. Introduction



Shen Dingli, Professor and Executive Dean at Fudan University, writes that the new leadership in Pyongyang has to continue to strengthen Kim Jong-un's power base, which doesn't allow it to be either too hostile or receptive to the outside world. It also has to be politically correct and follow Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung's Juche ideology, demonstrating self-reliance. Therefore, to quit the nuclear weapons program is a non-starter. While the DPRK has signaled its intent to return to the Six-Party Talks, this is, in Shen Dingli's opinion, a tactical move, not a strategic commitment to denuclearization. "All parties involved in the talks should combine their legitimate needs with a realistic approach ... Unless other parties would relinquish their nuclear weapons or the benefit of a nuclear umbrella, demanding Pyongyang to rid its nuclear program without prior trust-building is wishful thinking." In the meantime, in order to manage its shortage of resources, the DPRK has to keep bargaining with others and develop its economy—and this could bode well for engagement and stability.

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## **II. Report by Shen Dingli**

-“The DPRK: Uncertain but More Hopeful”

by Shen Dingli

With Pyongyang's power succession at the end of 2011, the world has been watching the DPRK warily. On the one hand it is clear that all stakeholders would like to see stability on the peninsula, especially during the period of power transition in the hermit kingdom. Thus far this seems to be the case, through the synergy of all relevant parties. On the other hand, all stakeholders hope that stability will be sustained over the medium and long term. However, this is uncertain and depends upon what cost other parties would like to pay.

Though Kim Jong-un succeeded his father at a young age, his succession was not unpredicted. For the last two years Kim Jong-il has been successfully promoting his youngest son to the top-tiers of leadership. Though he didn't survive long enough to consolidate Kim Jong-un's power base, Kim Jong-il had enough time to allow people at home and abroad to be prepared for such an eventuality.

As the DPRK's immediate neighbor China has a high stake in the stability of the Korean Peninsula. Six decades ago, China was strategically trapped in a war in Korea that it didn't want to happen. Such danger still lingers, as we saw a year ago in the artillery exchange between the DPRK and Yeonpyeong Island, controlled by the ROK. At a time of economic development, the last thing China would like to have is turbulence on its periphery. Therefore, after the announcement of Kim Jong-il's death, the Chinese government paid adequate tribute to him and exchanged views with the ROK and Japan etc., so as to seek low-profile consensus to jointly stabilize the peninsula.

A month after the demise of Kim Jong-il, the DPRK seems internally stable, which should come as no surprise. Domestically, elites in North Korea benefit from sustaining the regime, despite the change of a specific leader. Though Kim Jong-un is rather young, and not as experienced as his father, he is flanked by his immediate family members and other senior leaders, as well as the military. In an extremely closely monitored Asian society where filial piety still matters, no one wants to make an untimely change in leadership.

But short-term stability doesn't equate with permanent solidity. Over time, Kim Jong-un will face mounting challenges from within – a perennial food shortage, stagnant economy, declining competitiveness, and possibly morale problems. To sustain the party's leadership, the young leader has to come up with certain changes to help his country and people.

Presently, the DPRK has taken a cautious stance. It has to continue to strengthen the new leader's power base at home, which doesn't allow it to be too hostile or receptive to the outside. It has to be politically correct and follow Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung's Juche ideology, demonstrating self-reliance. Therefore, to quit their nuclear weapons program is a total non-starter. Meantime, to manage its shortage of resources—food in particular—the DPRK has to keep bargaining with others, including playing the nuclear card.

Given all of the difficulties the DPRK has faced, expecting it to have a hard-landing is unrealistic. Ever since the end of the Cold War, the DPRK has disappointed those who wish or expect it to collapse. Instead, it has succeeded in conducting two nuclear tests without bogging down its economy. The DPRK today is less likely to face a preemptive attack. Reasonably, the leadership in Pyongyang could be expected to continue its current style, running both a shabby economy and a rudimentary nuclear deterrent.

Nevertheless, as the DPRK's nuclear wherewithal has assured the regime's security, it will start to be more ready to address its economic security. Pyongyang knows that nuclear weapons are not food and won't provide the state with economic subsistence. With its nuclear deterrent as its last security resort, North Korea is in a more secure position to try and feed its people with rice and meat soup.

Kim Jong-un could have emerged at the right time, as his country's economy has been rusty for long enough and its defense deterrent has been addressed. In all likelihood, so long as he is in power, he will not refuse any means that would bring his country and people out of the marsh.

As China seeks stability in its periphery, it sees common interests with the DPRK—building its economy through streamlining internal power. After Kim Jong-il died, China quickly sent messages to Pyongyang, recognizing Kim Jong-un's leadership and urging his people to surround him. China will probably increase its aid to show support for the new leadership. However, China also expects a return on this aid—the DPRK will, over time under Kim Jong-un's leadership, become a source of stability in Northeast Asia.

The DPRK has signaled its intent to return to the Six-Party Talks. In my opinion this is a tactical move, not a strategic commitment to denuclearization. Some other parties in Western countries are interested in seeing the talks resume, but still have difficulty in restarting negotiations with the DPRK without an apology for the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents. However, all parties should combine their legitimate needs with a realistic approach. Unless other parties would relinquish their nuclear weapons or the benefit of a nuclear umbrella, demanding Pyongyang to rid its nuclear program without prior trust-building is wishful thinking.

On January 16th 2012 the Associated Press opened a bureau in Pyongyang. The DPRK now permits American news agencies to report on it with full journalistic means, a clear demonstration of its

opening-up. China and other countries shall encourage such moves to allow more communications, and hopefully to further expand mutual understanding. This would have the effect of building mutual trust and respect, as well as reducing threat levels, without relying on a nuclear deterrent. China will help promote the DPRK's constructive engagement with the rest of the world.

Even in the area of denuclearization, setting a realistic phased program—such as “capping, freezing, and reserving” the DPRK nuclear development—would be far more conducive than “complete, verifiable, irreversible, disarmament”. Kim Jong-un doesn't promise to be able to save his country, but he bodes better for a positive change in North Korea.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)