

# Policy Forum 07-046: What Next After Kim Jong-il?

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By Lee Byong-Chul

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Lee Byong-Chul](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

## I. Introduction

Lee Byong-Chul, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Cooperation(IPC), a non-partisan policy advisory body based in Seoul, South Korea, writes, "Whatever the scenario might be, it is clear in the minds of many that the stability of the communist regime is more important than anything else; in particular, China and the U.S. could not invoke a regime change in North Korea at their own disposal but certainly want to lead the North in the respective directions that they think it needs to

go. At present, the only hope they have is North Korea's complete, verifiable and irrevocable dismantlement of all the nuclear facilities. In other words, Kim Jong-il as a negotiable partner still seems to be on their mind."

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## **II. Article by Lee Byong-Chul**

- "What Next After Kim Jong-il?"

By Lee Byong-Chul

The most dramatic change in North Korea may not be the sudden announcement of its nuclear disarmament, but the absence of the leadership that has successfully controlled the communist regime for over 60 years.

The North Korean regime change has most recently become a hot issue as it intends to put the nuclear issue on the shelf again. Some experts here in Seoul are fond of pointing out that like France's Ancien Regime, that collapsed at one blow, almost with no resistance, the communist regime could take a similar course in terms of an unexpected and fatal change of the leadership.

The fears that it is likely to spark militarily and diplomatically sharp conflicts between Washington and Pyongyang, will no doubt sharpen a blunt debate over the existence of Kim Jong-il's regime by getting tough with North Korea -- if talks fail. More importantly, China surely wants the nuclear issues resolved before the 2008 Olympics in Beijing for regional stability in Northeast Asia.

Then, how and when would Kim's reign crumble away? Supposing that Kim's iron-fist leadership cannot survive any longer with the issue of nuclear disarmament unsettled?

First of all, the power politics to be drawn up post-Kim are not necessarily a zero-sum game of disrupting the whole state into chaos. Kim Jong-il might allow his troupe of loyal military generals to lead the nation collectively, unless he handpicks one of his sons as a successor. If completed with no conflict, it would establish an extraordinary paradigm for opening up a new chartered course in North Korea.

In that case, it is possibly neither explosion nor implosion. Yet history shows that the collective system of leadership -- whatever its type might be -- is short-lived essentially because of the collective group's corrupt, obdurate and self-interested ambitions, tempting foreign countries to become involved in the ensuing political disruptions.

It goes without saying that Kim Jong-il still gives the military a green light to "dominate" even the nuclear issue; the military has secured its political dominance by putting at risk the North Korea-U.S. nuclear negotiation through a recent launching of a short-range missile toward the East Sea. The military is seemingly cementing its role in the crucial decision-making as a formidable force after Kim Jong-il. Aiming for a stable regime, the military has opted for a limited course of change that would not damage the North itself fundamentally. Kim Jong-il, keen to keep the power he inherited from his father Kim Il-sung who suddenly died in 1994, fully recognizes some of the tremendous perils that will come about as soon as he dies -- particularly that the achievements he and his father alike have made would be inevitably diluted. So, the challenge facing Kim Jong-il is

finding ways to overcome his own dilemma, whether to view the collective system as a troublesome leadership or a valued, if nettlesome, strategic partnership.

Second, his illness is likely to hasten the regime change. Born in 1942, Kim is allegedly suffering from a variety of ailments including diabetes, if not serious outwardly. Some people who met him also witness that he does not look as healthy as they expect. Most recently, Kim Jong-chul, aged 26, and Jong-woon, 23, two sons of Kim Jong-il through his third marriage with Ko Young-hee, have been seen accompanying their father at various official functions including inspections of military bases, as Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea, did the same as a series of succession methods for Kim Jong-il for a long time.

One North Korea expert close to the South Korean government stated: "Even though Chairman Kim has not yet designated a successor, it is my assessment that he has in mind either Jong-chul or Jong-woon for this role ... it seems that he is taking these two along on military base inspections to see who is more suitable."

Kim Jong-il expressly prohibited debate over the succession question in December 2005 and over fears of becoming a lame duck, has largely avoided the issue. The fact that he appears to be considering the issue by taking his two sons along on official functions may be due to the recent deterioration of his health. Up until now, Chairman Kim has appeared in 23 public functions this year. This is nearly a reduction by half of the 47 events that he participated in during the same period last year.

Jong-chul and Jong-woon are still candidates for the succession. However, Kim's 4th wife and current first lady, Kim Ok, may promote their half-brother Jong-nam aged 36, first son of Kim Jong-il and Sung Hae-lim, into the power struggle with the two brothers. Jong-nam is widely known to be a troublemaker who illegally attempted to sneak into Japan a few years ago, and the 43 year old Kim Ok, who is deeply involved and significantly influential in Chairman Kim's regime, is a factor that cannot be ignored when considering the succession issue.

Third, as the unity of the elite groups is less a reflection than a distortion of the reality of North Korean politics, there will be the destructive regime change that is brought about by the collapse of the ideology of Juche [self-reliance] and the absence of a new legitimacy to replace it, instead of a constructive regime change that aims at solidifying the status quo economically and politically.

It is quite wrong to believe that everyone in the elite class supports Kim Jong-il when he is forcing them to make unblinking devotions, even though it is necessary for Kim Jong-il, in order to retain the ideological purity of Juche, to interpret the market economy as a kind of extreme form of reaction. The sudden replacement of North Korea's Prime Minister Park Bong-ju has also something to do with this, essentially because he called for an introduction of a capitalism-tinted incentive system. The appearance of ideological chaos arises from the clash and the confusion between the dissociation of the fragile Juche ideology and the novel market economy eventually spreading to the whole region of the North. It is going to shake to its foundations the system of thought on which the unique ideology that has been based on, thus instigating the crisis of a civil war which will entice foreign powers to come in over the long run, like Iraq.

Whatever the scenario might be, it is clear in the minds of many that the stability of the communist regime is more important than anything else; in particular, China and the U.S. could not invoke a regime change in North Korea at their own disposal but certainly want to lead the North in the respective directions that they think it needs to go. At present, the only hope they have is North Korea's complete, verifiable and irrevocable dismantlement of all the nuclear facilities. In other words, Kim Jong-il as a negotiable partner still seems to be on their mind.

Otherwise, they might wait for the ripeness for revolt of poverty-stricken peasants, young workers and soldiers who surely do not blind themselves to the realities of the rest of the world. Inevitably, a North Korean regime would occur if these people continue to be left behind. So, it should be more effective and productive that all the countries concerned including South Korea and the U.S. need to refocus their attentions on the urgent prevention of the leaks of nuclear weapons program in case the North falls down, rather than on the fruitless and never-ending negotiations in the six-party talks. It should do so without delay.

### **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](mailto: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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[Return to top](#)  
[back to top](#)

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