

Our Favorite Topic for Speculation: Succession Scenarios in North Korea

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It seems that Kim Jong-il's health, perhaps North Korea's most closely guarded secret, is on everyone's minds these days. Rumors of Kim's ailments are growing in their level of seriousness, from the stroke that he evidently suffered in August 2008, to diabetes, heart disease, heart failure, and most recently, pancreatic cancer along with reports that he has chronic renal failure which has placed the 67-year old on dialysis. While it is difficult to prove which, if any, of these may be accurate, one thing is certain: the issue of leadership succession is now a significant concern both inside and outside North Korea.

North Korea has never acknowledged Kim's stroke and questions to North Korean officials about his health are routinely rejected. His health is not discussed inside the country, but a team of doctors from France acknowledged last year they were called in by North Korea to treat Kim after his stroke. Since the beginning of the year, the Dear leader has kept up a busy schedule of visits around the country touring factories, farms and military bases in what is seen as a desperate attempt to convey a sense of normalcy. Recent photographs and television images of him show him limping and frail. It is Mr. Kim's loss of weight, in particular, that has elevated speculation about the severity and nature of what is wrong. In his latest public appearance on July 8 at a memorial for his father, Mr. Kim looked thinner and appeared to have less hair than before. His mouth also looked lopsided and there were other indications of paralysis on the left side of his body.

To outsiders, impending change in North Korea has been most visible in an accelerated pace of weapons tests, including a long-range missile fired on April 5 and a nuclear device exploded on May 25. North Korea has also reduced diplomatic contacts and activities, launched a massive propaganda campaign to rally citizens to the government's side and clamped down on public markets and other economic activities that threaten citizens' reliance on and devotion to the state. On July 15, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Strategic Affairs, Michael Nacht stated that Kim is sick, and his youngest son and heir apparent may be in an unstable position to take the helm. Therefore, he said that the U.S. Defense Department is developing a scenario in preparation for a future North Korea without Kim Jong-il.

Successor Line-up

Kim Jong-il's health is a topic of intense international interest, in large part because we are unclear about who would succeed him and what that would mean for the stability of the regime. However, most believe power will be kept within the family. Kim has three known sons, and in recent months there have been widespread reports that the youngest son, Kim Jong-un, has been designated the heir apparent. Unlike his father who inherited power at the age of 52 after his father Kim Il-sung died in 1994, however, Kim Jong-un has very little experience in government, only recently being given a low level appointment in the powerful National Defense Commission (NDC), and is a mere 26 years old.

Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law, is also a frequent subject of succession conversations. Jang was recently elevated to one of the eight members of the NDC, and accompanied the ailing North Korean leader 42 times out of a total 70 appearances in the first half of 2009. Jang, who taught Jong-un when he took home-schooling before attending the International School of Berne in Switzerland, could play a pivotal role in paving the way for the less experienced younger Kim's succession to power.

But what if Kim's demise comes before the necessary preparations for a transition to his son could take place? Or what if the preparations are not enough? Since 1994, Kim has ruled North Korea with absolute

authority, leading to concerns his death could trigger chaos or a power struggle within the elite members of the regime. In a recent KEI Academic Paper, Dr. Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. addressed the potential power struggle and outcome scenarios should Kim Jong-il die before everything is “ready.” Among them he highlights the following scenarios:

The first is that there would be a violent power struggle within the inner circle that surrounds him. Each side would attempt to gain the support of the military because in a time of crisis this would be the most logical power base. It is known that certain powerful members of the military favor different members of the Kim clan. The potential for several splits and resultant violence is high in such a scenario.

Another scenario could be that the military itself would attempt to seize power...What has held the generals together since the inception of the Kim family regime has been their absolute loyalty to Kim Il-sung and then to his son. Without this bond, a number of factions could form very quickly or, worse, confusion within the military could ensue.

Still another scenario that is possible is that members of the military might seize power in the existing vacuum following Kim’s death, after first overthrowing his named successor, and would then sue for peace and unification with the South. Although this scenario may seem far fetched (and is rarely if ever mentioned by analysts who watch North Korea), there is reason to believe it is possible. There are rumors among scholars and members of NGOs who follow North Korea that several of the generals in North Korea are on the payroll of the NIS (the largest South Korean intelligence agency). Given the well-documented corruption that exists within the North Korean government, this should not be a surprise...

Another scenario that many analysts have discussed and that seems as likely as any is that, if the named successor is unable to hold his power base together, if the party (and the OGD) cannot unite, and if the army becomes factionalized, the country could fall into violent civil war.

The different sectors of power and influence within North Korea’s leadership fall under different umbrellas. As Dr. Bechtol stated, “Kim Jong-il does not accrue his power from only the military. He also does not accrue his power from only the party...he does not accrue his power from only the security services. He accrues his power from all of them—and from placing his trust in a few close relatives who have proven absolutely loyal to him.” The challenge facing whatever entity will succeed the dear leader, is to become the chairman of the NDC, in charge of the Korea Workers Party (KWP), and in control of both the civilian and military security services.

Moving Forward Without Answers

Answers about who the regime intends to sell as the next leader may be gleaned from paying attention to internal propaganda efforts. One to watch is the first-ever documentary about Kim Jong Il's life, currently under production. The retrospective film will be similar in function to a 20-part film the regime began producing about national founder Kim Il Sung, in 1993—a year before he died of heart failure. The biopic could be used to demonstrate the inevitability of a son taking over so as to make North Korean people accept the succession as a matter of tradition. Pyongyang's state media said that the country has produced the first part of a Kim Jong Il film that “will comprehensively deal with the immortal 'Songun' (military first) revolutionary exploits performed by” Kim. Elsewhere “long live..” campaigns are ramping up to solidify legitimacy of the Kim family.

Experts will also be watching personnel and leadership maneuvering within the KWP, NDC, and military and security outfits to try and gauge where it seems power might emerge. For more on the individual and entity dynamics within North Korea’s leadership, and to read more about potential succession scenarios,

please see Dr. Bechtol's full paper at <http://www.keia.org/Publications/AcademicPaperSeries/2009/APS-Bechtol.pdf>.

With more questions than answers regarding who will succeed Kim Jong-il, when, and how, the United States is forging ahead with "plans" in the event of trouble regardless. On July 22, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Timothy Keating, said "I can tell you that we have plans with the United States Forces Korea and others in place if the president tells us to execute those plans, in the event of some uncertain succession in the North." But he added, "I don't think it is axiomatic that the departure of Kim Jong-il means a national security crisis. We would hope it wouldn't. But we are going to be prepared if it does mean that."

Which leaves us with a final question on succession in North Korea: Given the potential scenarios, and the reality that regime survival depends on an authoritative closed society, what does one "hope" for in a future leader of North Korea?