

North Korea after Kim Jong-Il...what we (don't) know

Eric J. Ballbach

Institute of Korean Studies

Freie Universität Berlin

Introduction

The news of Kim Jong-Il's death, which became public on Monday, December 19, 2011, sent a wave of confusion around the globe. What does it mean for the future developments in North Korea, for the negotiations surrounding the North's nuclear program and for the larger political sphere in Northeast Asia in general? While it is both too early to conclusively answer these questions just yet and impossible to precisely trace and reconstruct the developments within North Korea's inner power circle, several aspects of immediate relevance shall nevertheless be put up for discussion: firstly, while Kim Jong-Un's path to succession may have been utterly different than the one of Kim Jong-Il it is safe to assume that the important question of succession was not answered *ad hoc*. Nevertheless, the actual legitimacy of the leadership will steadily decrease the further the "family line" moves away from Kim Il-Sung. Lastly, North Korea's political regime, which was characterized by an authoritarian leadership style since its inception in the 1940s, does not change as long as the general power structures and thus the nature of the regime itself do not change.

North Korea's official Statement of Kim Jong-Il's demise...

"Kim Jong-il passed away at 8:30 a.m. on Dec. 17 from a great mental and physical strain caused by his uninterrupted field guidance tour for the building of a thriving nation," the statement of the North's official Korean Central News Agency reads, which was released on Monday, December 19, 2011.¹ The statement was issued under the names of the key state and political organs including the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee and Central Military Committee and the National Defense Committee. The official Statement, which aimed to address both the general public and the Party and Military, goes on by praising the achievements of Kim Jong-Il, and calling on its citizens and the Members of the Party and the Military to overcome the death of the leader under the guidance of Kim Jong-Un, who served as the vice chairman of the party's CMC and who was introduced as "the great successor to the revolutionary cause of Juche and

¹ The English translation was published on Tuesday, December 20, 2011.

outstanding leader of our party, army and people.” The statement continues: “Kim Jong Un’s leadership provides a sure guarantee for creditably carrying to completion the revolutionary cause of Juche through generations, the cause started by Kim Il Sung and led by Kim Jong Il to victory (...) Under the leadership of Kim Jong Un we should turn our sorrow into strength and courage and overcome the present difficulties and work harder for fresh great victory of the Juche revolution (...) All the party members, servicepersons and people should remain loyal to the guidance of respected Kim Jong Un and firmly protect and further cement the single-minded unity of the party, the army and the people. Under the uplifted banner of Songun, we should increase the country’s military capability in every way to reliably safeguard the Korean socialist system and the gains of revolution and make the torch lit in South Hamgyong Province, the drive for the industrial revolution in the new century, rage throughout the country and thus bring about a decisive turn in building an economic power and improving the standard of people’s living (...) Our party and people will strive hard to boost friendship and solidarity with the peoples of different countries, guided by the idea of independence, peace and friendship, and build an independent and peaceful, new world free from domination, subjugation, aggression and war. Arduous is the road for our revolution to follow and grim is the present situation. But no force on earth can check the revolutionary advance of our party, army and people under the wise leadership of Kim Jong Un.” The North also released a 232-member funeral committee which prominently puts Kim Jong-un on the first place. The KCNA said that Kim will be laid to rest in the Kumsusan Memorial Palace where the embalmed body of his father lies in state, and that the funeral ceremony is set to be held in the capital of Pyongyang on Dec. 28. The North set a mourning period from Saturday, December 17 to December 29. According to the KCNA statement, foreign delegations will not be accepted at the funeral ceremony. “During the mourning period, all organizations across the country will carry out events to express their condolences. All organizations will raise their national flag and refrain from any entertainment activities during the period,” the KCNA said.

...and the first reaction of South Korea

After the death of Kim Jong-Il became known in South Korea, President Lee immediately convened an emergency meeting of the Cabinet (including Prime Minister Kim Hwang-sik, Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, Unification Minister Yu Woo-ik, Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin and National Intelligence Service chief Won Sei-hoon) to discuss the handling of the situation. Lee Myung-Bak stressed that the government will make utmost efforts to maintain security and stability on the Korean Peninsula. “For the future of South Korea, peace and stability on the

peninsula is more crucial than anything else. We should maintain a close cooperative system with the international community so that (his death) would not cause any threat to peace and stability on the peninsula,” Lee was quoted by his spokesperson as saying during the meeting. “Related ministries should ensure that our national credibility will not be undermined by the geographical risks. They should make sure that citizens carry out their normal economic activities. (To prevent) division among people following the death is also very crucial.” While the South Korean Military put its armed forces on alert and increased its vigilance against possible contingencies that could flare up after the death of the North Korean leader, both the rhetoric and the political actions of the South Korean government suggest that no dramatic actions were assumed.

The Emergence of a new Leadership in North Korea: What we (don't) know

Little is known about the personal and political socialization of Kim Jong-Un as well as about the workings of the inner power structure in North Korea, which makes an assessment of the situation all the harder. However, despite such a lack of information and while it is still too early to comprehensively assess all the implications of Kim Jong-Il's demise and the related emergence of a new leadership in North Korea, a number of rather general yet important observations can be made.

A different path to succession...

When the North Korean leader and founding father Kim Il-Sung died in July 1994, Kim Jong-Il had been honed as a successor of his father for nearly 20 years (officially since 1981, unofficially since 1974). After passing through a number of important positions in both the North Korean Worker's Party (KWP) and the Korean People's Army (KPA), Kim Jong-Il officially took over power in 1997 (after a three year mourning period) following the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994. Hence, Kim Jong-Il was not only raised very visible as Kim Il-Sung's (future) successor, but it was done in a long time-span in which Kim Jong-Il was able to establish a system of allies and trustees, which was firmly in place when he took office. The current succession of Kim Jong-Un as North Korea's next leader seems utterly different compared to Kim Jong-Il's. As Peter Hayes, Scott Bruce, and David von Hippel (2011) put it: “The problem (...) is that not much is known about [Kim Jong-Il's] third son and designated 27 year old successor, Kim Jong Un. Indeed, he has as only ever appeared in public accompanied by his father after nearly 14 months in the limelight.” During that time, Kim Jong-Un seemed to be rather rapidly elevated to high power positions such as the

Vice Chairman of the KWP's Central Military Commission, and was named Four-Star General. However, while this points to central differences in the two Kim's paths to succession – and while Kim Jong-Il's death may have come suddenly – it does not *per se* mean that basic arrangement and agreements regarding the succession (and the potential reshuffling of the distribution of power between persons and institutions) were established *ad hoc*. It is safe to assume that such a central question as the regulation of succession, which directly touches upon the stability of the regime itself, is too important to be settled *ad hoc*. Put differently, the fact that Kim Jong-Un's succession plan was put in place outside the limelight of the international community does not mean that North Korea didn't prepare for the current situation. However, given Kim Jong-Un's age and the fact that he did not serve in different positions in North Korea's central power institutions such as the Military and the Party not only raises the question of experience, but also if Kim Jong-Un comes to office with a similar system of trustees in place. Unfortunately, these questions, which touch upon the workings of the inner power circle in P'yŏngyang, cannot be answered. However, it is safe to assume that North Korea's system of heredity power succession within the Kim family is confronted with a basic legitimacy problem, in that the actual legitimacy will most likely decrease the further the family line moves away from Kim Il-Sung.

...in a different internal and external environment?

Immediately after the death of Kim Jong-Il several media outlets, observers, and politicians suggested that the change in North Korea's leadership opens up a possibility of a comprehensive shift of the North's political course. However, these expectations are unlikely to be met in the short term, since such a change would ultimately require a change in the North's political system, which seems rather unlikely. To begin with, North Korea has been ruled by an authoritarian power structure since its inception and its personnel never had experiences with democratic structures and a democratic political culture. The fact that Kim Jong-Un spent some years in the democratic Suisse as a teenager does little to change that. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that the emerging of a new leadership will lead to a change of the general political conditions in North Korea. While it is not yet possible to assess the future power structure in North Korea, it is safe to assume that the next leadership, however its personnel composition might look like, will (have to) act within the structures of the existing regime. To that end, no comprehensive structural changes are expected to occur within North Korea's political regime, and even an eventual power struggle, which some observers consider possible, would in all probability be staged within the realm of the existing political system – not least since all (or at least all known)

political figures which contemplable for such a power struggle seem to benefit from this system. Besides such internal considerations, a continuity of North Korea's political course is also suggested because of continuity in its external challenges and relations. It is rather questionable that the new leadership, if socialized within the current system, will abandon long-standing antagonistic identity patterns (especially *vis-à-vis* the U.S. and Japan) in the short term and fade out the repeated crises with the U.S. which have been so vital for the construction and reassurance of the North's national identity. Similarly, it might be assumed that North Korea's outlook on the basic security situation in Northeast Asia and its perception of threat does not change either through the change in leadership. At the same time, China as well as the U.S. and South Korea arguably will remain the North's strategic foreign policy focus.

Where do we go from here?

A Politically Calm 2012?

Although the succession of Kim Jong-Un might lead to further (supposedly limited) provocations of the North (not least to boost the young Kim's missing military credentials), "Kim Jong-Il's death may make Korea the land of the morning calm for at least a year during which political transitions will also occur in China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United States", as Hayes, Bruce and von Hippel suggest. Hence, while all six countries might primarily focus on domestic issues in the months ahead, thus suggesting a politically calm 2012, further progress in specific issues such as the nuclear question will most likely not occur, especially since the succession of the new leadership will take time, thus putting other (even major) policy decisions in the background. Hence, North Korea is most likely to retreat from substantive international negotiations in the short term, as the new leadership will need time to consolidate internally, although – given the pressing challenges such as the dire economic situation – time is what the new leadership might not have too much of. To that end, the emergence of a new leadership could also open a "window of opportunity" (Hayes, Bruce and von Hippel), and while the emerging new leadership in North Korea is not expected to shift the North's nuclear policies in the short term, there still might be room for (some) optimism. The change of leadership, while not generally changing the rules of the (nuclear) game itself, obviously influences the further course of the negotiations regarding the North's nuclear program(s). Although the latest negotiation framework to help settle the nuclear crises on the Korean peninsula, the Six Party Talks, has been suspended since North Korea pulled out of the talks in April 2009, a number of contacts have been made between North Korean and U.S. officials in 2011. For example, the

latest reported progress during US-North Korean talks in Beijing on North Korea's uranium enrichment "could yet prove significant if this can be parlayed into a 'legacy' position of the Dear Leader. Seasoned North Korea watchers may see parallels with the genesis of the Agreed Framework nuclear negotiations, jump-started in 1994 in the aftermath of Kim Il Sung's death. Some may ponder the parallel between both Kims' sudden death, by heart attack, and a dynastic succession coinciding with a moment of potential crisis or breakthrough in US-North Korea relations" (Euan Graham). To that end, the international community is well advised to further open the window of opportunity by establishing long-term cooperation structures with North Korea – not least since at the current state of affairs in North Korea, it can be expected that a policy of heightening threat and comprehensive pressure would indeed rather smoothen North Korea's power transition. As history has shown, North Korea is able to deal with external pressure. In fact, the dimension of external threat and pressure politics became an integral part of North Korea's national identity – as did the struggle of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il against these external threat and pressures. Hence, the international community is well advised not only to watch closely but to engage North Korea in a systematic manner.

Literature

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