

## IN CONVERSATION WITH THE AGORA

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### COMMENTARY

## **On the Passing of North Korea's 'Dear Leader:'**

### **Kim Jong-il (1941-2011)**

Compiled by Brendon Legault

*The world of politics is a fast moving one; what is true one moment may not be true of the next. Unfortunately, the full scholarly process is not always well suited to dissecting swiftly moving issues, as good scholarship is based upon careful reflection and critical review—time consuming processes. However, sometimes it is necessary for scholars to provide advice on the go, as situations evolve and develop in real time. These judgments may lack the meticulously researched analysis that is possible when events are viewed in hindsight. However, these judgments are no less important, as they will often determine how political actors respond to changing events.*

*Few events have the potential to change the political landscape as dramatically as the death of an authoritarian leader, as their passing frequently leaves a power vacuum in their wake. This was certainly true of the death of Kim Jong-il, the former leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, who passed away on December 17, 2011. At this time, it is unclear as to exactly how events will unfold in Korea, as little is known about the reclusive nation. However, the collection of essays found below represent four initial perspectives on the passing of Kim Jong-il and its effect on the world.*

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## Gleeful of Their Chains: The Unlikelihood of Popular Democratization in North Korea

By Tyler Dawson

In a speech on the “Axis of Evil” nations in 2009, journalist Christopher Hitchens explained that the political climate in North Korea made it seem as if Kim Il Sung leafed through a copy of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* and figured he may as well “give it the old college try.” The “Great Leader” died in 1994, and his successor, Kim Jong Il (the Dear Leader) has just died, presumably turning rule of the nation over to his son, Kim Jong Un, who has been given the name the Great Successor.

This will likely have implications for regional stability and politics as Kim Jong Un attempts to consolidate power over military and government officials who have significant seniority. Indeed, it has already been confirmed that the military will share power with the newest member of the North Korean dynasty.<sup>1</sup> On the domestic front, there is also the potential that Kim Jong Un will manage to alleviate the suffering of his countrymen, who have been languishing for two decades in a famine that has killed some three million North Koreans.<sup>2</sup> Educated in Switzerland,

some commentators have expressed optimism that Western democratic ideals might have leached into Kim Jong Un, and that he will be a reformer.

The death of a dictator and the aging of the dictatorial class bring out the hope that there might be some sort of political reform, or a grassroots push back against authoritarianism. In other longstanding dictatorships, such as Cuba (which is in a state of mourning for the passing of the Dear Leader) there is an underground reform movement, and there are stirrings of discontent among the populace.<sup>3</sup> In the scheme of things, 2011 has been a pretty good year for democratization; grassroots pushes for democracy have finally found success in the Middle East, overthrowing decades of dictatorship and oppression.

However, this potential simply does not exist in North Korea. The national philosophy, Kim Il Sung’s Juche Idea, is so thoroughly inculcated that North Koreans are, essentially, gleeful of

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Kang Lim, “Exclusive: North Korea’s Military to Share Power with Kim’s Heir,” Reuters, December 21, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/21/us-korea-north-exclusive-idUSTRE7BK0FX20111221> (accessed December 23, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Seddon, “Last of the Great Ogres: As Millions Perished in Gulags he Feasted on Caviar. But the Death of Kim Jong Il Leaves the Nuclear State in the Hands of his

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Playboy Son,” Daily Mail, December 20, 2011.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2076393/Kim-Jong-Il-dead-North-Korea-nuclear-state-hands-playboy-son.html> (accessed December 30, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Nick Gillespie, “Like Woodstock for Tyrants: Cuba Declares Three Days of Mourning for Kim Jong-il, Reason, December 20, 2011.

<http://reason.com/blog/2011/12/20/like-woodstock-for-tyrants-cuba-declares> (accessed December 23, 2011).

their chains and in no particular hurry to shed them in favour of reform.

In his brilliant book *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters*, B.R. Myers explains the North Korean ideology in one sentence: “The Korean people are too pure blooded, and therefore too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great paternal leader.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, ideologically speaking North Korea is not very closely aligned with Marxist ideas of progress generally found in communist states; it is far closer to the Nazi racial ideology wherein Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is a bastion of racial purity, protected by its exalted leaders from the depraved “other.” The dictatorship in North Korea is not one in which the power structure is maintained through the use of force and maintained by fear of the government. It is, judging from these observations, a self-reinforcing system in which many of the people subscribe thoroughly to the personality cult and mythology that has been constructed over the last half century.

The result of this view is that the grown people who have been recorded sobbing hysterically over the death of the Secretary (the previously deceased Kim Il Sung is technically still President) are at least partially genuine.<sup>5</sup> People

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<sup>4</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 5, Kindle edition.

<sup>5</sup> “The People Are Crying Tears of Blood’: Millions of Wailing North Koreans Line Snow Bound Streets in Display of State-Controlled Grief for Kim Jong Il’s Funeral,” *Daily Mail*, December 29, 2011.

are legitimately torn up about the death of the man who systematically impoverished and famished them.

Realistically, it is difficult to understand how North Koreans have not attempted to change their lot in life. But, the death of the Great Leader and the ascendancy of the Dear Leader coincided almost exactly with a series of natural disasters that destroyed harvests and began the famine in the mid-1990s. This sort of calamity is undeniably the best opportunity to bring about change in a political system. However, North Koreans did nothing. This is, at least in part, due to the fantastically powerful system of propaganda that has built up the personality cult of North Korean leaders and simultaneously denigrated other nations around the world. For example, Myers points out that despite the famine in North Korea, state media pays a great deal of attention to African food shortages, making foreign hardships seem significantly worse.<sup>6</sup>

There is the potential, however small, that a revolutionary consciousness might be building in the nation. In previous years, Kim Jong Il moved to ban American clothing and music to keep it from young people, claiming it was a nefarious Western plot to impugn the purity of the race.<sup>7</sup> As

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2079237/Kim-Jong-Il-funeral-Millions-crying-North-Koreans-line-Pyongyangs-snow-bound-streets.html> (accessed December 30, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), 86, Kindle edition.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

well, South Korean activists do what they can to spread information about the outside world to their northern brethren.<sup>8</sup>

However, the weight of Korean history, of the military state under the rule of Kim Il Sung's descendants, and of public opinion, is stacked against reform. The seeds of a revolutionary consciousness may well be planted. But unfortunately for the region, for the Korean peninsula, and specifically for North Koreans, there does not appear to be any sort of reform in sight, nor any alleviation to the poverty and drudgery of daily life in the most totalitarian state in the world.

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<sup>8</sup> "South Korean Activists, Defectors Send Propaganda Leaflets into North Korea," Washington Post, December 20, 2011. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korean-activists-defectors-send-propaganda-leaflets-into-north-korea/2011/12/20/gIQAFCoD8O\\_story.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korean-activists-defectors-send-propaganda-leaflets-into-north-korea/2011/12/20/gIQAFCoD8O_story.htm) (accessed December 23, 2011).

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## Tears in Pyongyang, Worry in Washington

by Aaron Aitken

In Pyongyang, North Koreans responded to the death Kim Jong-il with an outpouring of grief and tears—if accounts by the reclusive nation’s state run media are to be believed.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in Washington, Kim Jong-il’s death triggered a cautious mood.<sup>2</sup> Although no American tears were shed at the passing of North Korea’s tyrannical dictator, Kim’s death was, and continues to be, a cause for concern. The elder Kim may have been a cruel and reclusive despot, who often provoked the West with confrontational maneuvers, but he was also a known entity. His death leaves the future direction of American policy in the Korean Peninsula riddled with uncertainties.

As it stands, it remains unclear as to whether Kim’s youngest son and appointed successor, Kim Jong-un, will be able to successfully seize control of the state—and as to what actions he will take in his pursuit of power. It is certainly possible that a power struggle might emerge between the inexperienced Kim Jong-un and senior elements of the North Korean military.<sup>3</sup> This uncertainty

entails a great deal of risk for the United States. However, the passing of Kim Jong-il also brings the faintest glimmer of hope that, with new leadership, North Korea might set off in a new direction. Optimists have predicted courses of action that range from the possible, like Chinese style economic reform, to the fanciful, like democratization and reunion with the South. Given both the risk and possibilities entailed by Kim’s death, how should the United States approach the new dynamic in the Korean Peninsula?

The United States has good reason to be concerned with the situation in North Korea. Kim Jong-un’s position as the heir apparent to the North Korean leadership is precarious, at best. Unlike Kim Jong-il, who had over a decade’s preparation to smooth the leadership transition from his own father, Kim Jong-un is a relatively new face in North Korea, having only been introduced to power after his father’s stroke in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Given his uncertain footing and lack of developed alliances, Kim Jong-un might be tempted to adopt a provocative stance towards South Korea as a way of bolstering his credentials with the all-important North Korean military establishment. It is already rumored that he was responsible for ordering the recent shelling of a South Korean island in the West Sea and the torpedo attack on the Cheonan, a South Korean naval

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<sup>1</sup> Cheo Sang-Hun and Norimitsu Onishi, “North Korea’s Tears: A Blend of Cult, Culture and Coercion,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

<sup>2</sup> MJ Lee, “Hillary Clinton: Concern for North Koreans,” *Politico*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.politico.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Max Fisher, “What If Kim Jong Il's Successor Isn't Ready?” *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com>.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Fackler, “Young Heir Faces Uncertain Transition in North Korea,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

corvette.<sup>5</sup> Further confrontational action would help cement the new leader's reputation as an able commander. If a power struggle develops between the young Kim and elements of the North Korean military, there is a similar risk. Each side might see embracing a hawkish stance as a way of giving themselves an edge in the leadership contest.

Despite the risks fermenting in North Korea, there is little direct action the United States can take to manipulate events within the country. Washington has little influence over North Korea's leaders, who have a deep and abiding distrust of American intentions.<sup>6</sup> The lack of political sway is augmented by the United States' limited knowledge of the inner workings of the North Korean state. All indications are that the U.S. was not even aware of the elder Kim's death until it was announced on state media—two days after he had passed.<sup>7</sup> This lack of influence, combined with the lack of reliable intelligence, leaves the U.S. with few avenues to pursue in seeking to sway the succession process; any attempt to do so would likely be met with hostility from Pyongyang.

The United States can, however, play a role in reassuring its neighbors in the face of the great uncertainty

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Landler and John H. Cushman Jr., "New Weight on U.S.-South Korea Relations," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Landler and Choe Sang-Hun, "In Kim's Undetected Death, Sign of Nation's Opacity," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

emanating from North Korea. The situation between North Korea and South Korea remains tense, particularly given the recent sinking of the Cheonan. If the South feels threatened by provocative moves by the North, they might adopt an aggressive stance themselves—increasing the likelihood of a spark in the situational tinderbox. Conflict between the two nations would not only be unwelcome, but disastrous. The massive North Korean artillery battery positioned across from Seoul—only twenty kilometers south of the demilitarized zone and home to over ten million—makes a devastating number of casualties all but a certainty. Accordingly, armed conflict ought to be avoided at all costs. The U.S. can play an integral role in this by reaffirming its security commitments to South Korea and using its significant pull in the South to urge a level headed approach. This, at the very least, may help prevent events in North Korea from spiraling into a cross border conflict

The United States should also consider using confidential channels of communication with Beijing, who has a greater degree of influence in Pyongyang, to urge the Chinese to encourage North Korea to continue strengthening links with China and begin Chinese style economic reform.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, economic activity has been growing along the Chinese-North Korean border and, in 2010, economic trade reached a record high of \$3.47

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<sup>8</sup> The United States cannot be seen as openly encouraging the Chinese to pressure the North Koreans, as this would raise North Korea's suspicions of Chinese collusion with Western powers.

billion (according to Chinese figures).<sup>9</sup> This is a trend that should be encouraged. Not only as a measure to reduce the immeasurable suffering of the North Korean people, but also because the more connected North Korea is with the global economy the less effective its extortionist tactics will become. In the past, North Korea has had little to lose by threatening the world it has few links with. Connecting the North Korean economy with the global economy would discourage the brinkmanship style diplomacy commonly practiced by the North, by increasing the leverage of other countries over it. The United States should have little trouble quietly convincing China that such a course of action is worth pursuing; if economic mismanagement continues in the North the country is at risk of breaking up and flooding China with unwanted refugees. As such, linking North Korea with the global economy is in the interests of both the U.S. and China.

Although the limited goals of the course of actions suggested above may not be the robust type of action traditionally favored by neoconservatives, it is the course of action with the best hope of minimizing conflict in the Korean Peninsula with only limited American commitments—an important factor in the age of military overextension.

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<sup>9</sup> Scott A. Snyder, “North Korea's Deepening Economic Ties With China,” *The Atlantic*, September 28, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com>.



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## China's DPRK Policy: Stabilizing the Korean Peninsula

by Yixiong Huang

The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Il, passed away on 17th December 2011, which worried many observers about the situation in the Northeast Asia and the future direction of the North Korea. As the most influential nation to North Korea, China's attitude towards the new leader of North Korea received many attentions. This paper will examine China's North Korea policy from historical and geopolitical perspectives by referring to China's overall foreign policy. It argues that China's main concern over the Korean Peninsula is the stability it holds, given that a stabilized region could provide a peaceful environment for China's own economic growth. Thus, China will strongly support Kim Jong-Un as the next leader of North Korea through the means of both political and economic support. Ultimately, China's desire is to urge the North Korea to reform.

The sudden death of the Chairman of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Kim Jong-Il, captured international attention and has prompted speculation about the future political direction of the DPRK and the development of the situation in the Northeast Asia. As a long-time ally, a guarantor, and the most influential foreign actor in the DPRK, China's attitude towards its political succession issue has received a great deal of concern. Beijing's support for the DPRK's next supreme leader Kim

Jong-Un has a significant impact on other countries' North Korea policies, such as the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States, and Japan.

### China's DPRK Policy

During the Cold War period, China's relationship with the DPRK is a complicated plot with a quirky twist. China's military support and participation in the Korean War allowed Kim Il-Sung's regime to maintain power in North Korea. However, due to the geopolitical reasons and the deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relations in the 1970s, the DPRK stood with the Soviet against China. In addition, after Deng Xiaoping's "Opening and Reform" policy in the late 1970s, China enjoyed great economic development. As China began to actively participate in the economy globally, it essentially affected China's foreign policy, resulting in a sense of normalization in China's relationships with most of the developed countries. Besides, China's establishment of diplomatic relationship with the ROK in 1992 caused a strong tension between China and the DPRK, and the mutual distrust increased.<sup>1</sup> Thus, China's "One

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel S. Kim, "Sino-North Korean Relations in the Post-Cold War World," in *North Korea: the Politics of Regime Survival*, edited by Young Whan Kihl and

Korea Policy” since 1949 had changed to “Two-Koreas Policy” in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

There are two main theories which have dominated China’s foreign policy since the 1990s. First, China strongly promoted its so called “New Security Concept” to the world, specifically, to its neighboring countries. The New Security Concept illustrates that military alliance will not guarantee long-term peace and only the economic and political interactions and developments among countries could decrease the tension between them because of interdependence.<sup>3</sup> However, the DPRK’s isolated economic policy and the Kosovo War warned China to re-establish a robust relationship with the DPRK in terms of China’s

national security.<sup>4</sup> Second, after Hu Jintao took power in China in 2002, he then proposed to build a “Harmonious World Order” to “prevent war and conflict and to safeguard world peace and security.”<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, the ultimate goals of both theories were to create a peaceful and cooperative international environment for China to continue its economic growth and to improve international public opinion for China’s peaceful rise. As a result, a stable situation in Northeast Asia is the pre-condition for China’s such motivations, and China paid more weight to smooth such relationships with its neighbors.<sup>6</sup> Within China’s foreign policy framework, on one hand, China strengthened its ties with the ROK by establishing the strategic cooperative partnership in 2008 and promoting a free trade agreement among China, the ROK, and Japan. On the other hand, the DPRK’s harassment of the South in 2010 and its nuclear program increased the tension in the Korean peninsula, which undermined China’s national interests. Since Taiwan authority has promised to develop a cooperative relationship to mainland China, the adventurism of the DPRK became the only

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Hong Nack Kim (New York: M.E. Sharpe 2006), 184.

Also see Heungkyu Kim, “From A Buffer Zone to a Strategic Burden: Evolving Sino-North Korea Relations during the Hu Jintao Era,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22:1(2010), 58.

<sup>2</sup> Baojun Li, *Contemporary Chinese Diplomacy* (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 1999), 179-180.

<sup>3</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Position Paper on the New Security Concept.”

<http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/gjs/gjz/zyhy/2612/2614/t15319.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2011). Also see Jeremy Paltiel, “China and the North Korea Crisis: The Diplomacy of Great Power Transition,” in *North Korea’s Second Nuclear Crisis and Northeast Asian Security*, edited by Seung-Ho Joo and Tae-Hwan Kwak (Burlington: Ashgate 2007), 97.

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel S. Kim, 186-187.

<sup>5</sup> Xinhua News Agency. “Hu Makes 4-Point Proposal for Building Harmonious World.” <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/UN/142408.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Heungkyu Kim, 63.

realistic security concern for China.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, in order to defend China's peaceful rise and economic development, China's main interest in the Korean peninsula is to maintain the stability of it, because only stability in the peninsula can create a peaceful environment for China's economic growth, and secure China's national security in terms of the DPRK's buffer zone. As for the nuclear crisis in the peninsula, China has organized the Six-Party Talks in Beijing since 2003 as the mechanism for denuclearizing the peninsula.<sup>8</sup> China wanted the DPRK to remove its nuclear program by providing them unconditional assistance of food and investment.<sup>9</sup> China's efforts have led to the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks in 2005, which clearly defines the common goal to denuclearize the Korean peninsula.<sup>10</sup> However, the DPRK's

nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 flagrantly violated the Joint Statement, which angered China and prompted them to support the United Nations' Security Council's 1718 and 1874 resolutions. The DPRK's nuclear tests have been seen as a provocation and betrayal of China's efforts to denuclearize the peninsula, and threatened China's status quo policy.<sup>11</sup>

### **China's Reaction and Policy after the Death of Kim Jong-Il**

Although the DPRK played against the consensus among the Six-Party Talks' partners, China still showed enough patience to communicate with the DPRK. China maintained its policy towards the DPRK and urged it to renounce its nuclear project. After Kim Jong-Il suffered a stroke in 2008, the political succession issue was put on the table. Kim Jong-Un, the third son of Kim Jong-Il, emerged as the successor of his father and appointed as a four star general in 2009.<sup>12</sup> Since Kim Jong-Un was designated as the new leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-Il travelled to China three times since 2010. It was believed that Kim Jong-Il has introduced Kim Jong-Un to Chinese leaders and called

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<sup>7</sup> You Ji. "Hedging Opportunities and Crises Against Pyongyang's Hereditary Succession: A Chinese Perspective." *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 20:1(2011), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Rozman. *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Peter M. Beck. "North Korea in 2010: Provocation and Succession." *Asian Survey* 51:1(2010) 39.

<sup>10</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China. "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks."

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<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t212707.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Keungkyu Kim, 64, 66-67.

<sup>12</sup> The Telegraph. "Kim Jong-il dies aged 69: latest Reaction." <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8964926/Kim-Jong-il-North-Korean-leader-dies-aged-69-live.html> (accessed on 26 December 2011).

China to parent and protect him in any emergency situation.<sup>13</sup>

The death of the Kim Jong-Il on 17th December 2011 will not affect to China's DPRK policy but will deepen China's voices over the succession issue in the DPRK. China believes that only a stabilized and a united DPRK among its party members and military officials could bring peace to the region, at least for a short term. Moreover, China's rhetoric could set the international tone for the DPRK's peaceful transition. For China, to maintain the stability in the Northeast Asia means to maintain the state survival of the DPRK.

Combining both political support and economic aid by China could reinforce Kim Jong-Un in establishing his legitimacy as the DPRK's new leader. First, China's political support to Kim Jong-Un will decrease the internal power struggle in the DPRK, especially the stressed relationship between the party and the military. Immediately, after the announcement of the death of Kim Jong-Il, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) sent condolences to the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), and illustrated the support for Kim Jong-Un and invited him to visit China: "(the CPC) believes that the DPRK people will definitely carry on at the behest of comrade Kim Jong Il, closely unite around the

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<sup>13</sup> Peter M. Beck, 36.

Worker's Party of Korea, turn their grief into strength under the leadership of comrade Kim Jong Un and make unremitting efforts for the construction of a strong socialist country and the realization of sustainable peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, China's political support reassured the worries of Kim Jong-Un, the U.S., the ROK, and Japan about a deteriorated situation in the peninsula and to prevent military conflict and confrontation among these countries. At the same time, China strengthening its communication with relevant parties about the situation in the peninsula could reduce the suspicions among them.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, the DPRK suffered from a great famine in the 1990s, which resulted in an estimated 2.8 to 3.5 million deaths, and that undermined the rule of the DPRK authorities.<sup>16</sup> The DPRK's foreign food supply mainly

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<sup>14</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China. "CPC Central Committee Sends the Message of Condolence over the Passing Away of Kim Jong Il." <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t889650.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China. "Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Talks over Phone with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and ROK Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan" <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t889674.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Marcus Noland, Sherman Robinson, and Tao Wang. "Famine in North Korea: Causes and Cures." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 49:4(2001), 743.

depended on China and the ROK before 2008. Since Lee Myung-bak's administration rejected the previous "Sunshine Policy" implemented by presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, currently, the DPRK's agriculture aid only comes from China. In June, the report from the World Food Program (WFP) indicated the DPRK is in serious food shortage and called for international aid.<sup>17</sup> China, during the DPRK's transition period would supply with a large amount of food aid in order to help the DPRK authorities to calm down the potential revolts by the farmers and maintain the social stability. China understands that political chaos the DPRK will result in a massive refugee wave to strike the China-DPRK border. To strike the China-DPRK border; automatically creating social problems in China's northeast provinces.

Furthermore, Beijing considered that the support to Kim Jong-Un will obtain some advantage from him.<sup>18</sup> China expects political and economic reform in the DPRK in order to stabilize its fragile political and economic structures. Although Kim Jong-Il has criticized every reform policy of China as a "betrayed of

<sup>17</sup> Reuters. "Hunger Crisis Grips North Korea as Food Runs Short." [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44808274/ns/world\\_news-asia\\_pacific/t/hunger-crisis-grips-north-korea-food-runs-short/#.TvkcoSNWpD4](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44808274/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/hunger-crisis-grips-north-korea-food-runs-short/#.TvkcoSNWpD4) (accessed on 26 December 2011).

<sup>18</sup> You Ji., 74.

socialism," his death provides an opportunity for the DPRK's new leader to reform, which could follow the Chinese model.<sup>19</sup> China's reform since 1979 diversified the CPC's legitimacy. Not only does this root from nationalism, but also from economic development. However, the hereditary succession in the DPRK does not provide sufficient legitimacy to the Kim family, because it is based on their fathers' words.<sup>20</sup> China is looking forward and seems determined to help this Swiss-educated leader to reform his country, considering the DPRK's potential economic development as a source of legitimacy of his rule.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Kim Jong-Un's succession also offered a chance to re-establish the Six-Party Talks to denuclearize the Korean peninsula in the near future. China's objective regarding the North Korea nuclear issue is to maintain the denuclearization of the peninsula by continuing dialogues.<sup>22</sup> China's influence over the DPRK at the transition time could make a difference to this issue. In addition, the continuation of the nuclear project has already

<sup>19</sup> Isabel Hilton. "Can Kim Jong-Un be North Korea's Deng Xiaoping?." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/19/kim-jong-un-north-korea-china> (accessed on 26 December 2011).

Also see You Ji, 62.

<sup>20</sup> You Ji., 60.

<sup>21</sup> Bates Gill. "Special Report: China's North Korea Policy, Assessing Interests and Influences." Published by United States Institute of Peace July 2011.

<sup>22</sup> You Ji., 69.

become a burden to the DPRK, while a denuclearized DPRK will benefit from it by receiving more chances to develop its economy with other countries, and to feed its people. Ultimately, the legitimacy of Kim Jong-Un could be deepened and strengthened.

China's DPRK policy is "essentially reactive" without any "freedom of action."<sup>23</sup> China's geopolitical situation and its desire to continue its economic growth determines China to be active in playing the key role of the DPRK's succession process. The strong political rhetoric of China to the death of Kim Jong-Il and support for Kim Jong-Un has strengthened the legitimacy of its succession and the continuation of the "Kim Dynasty." Its policy towards new leader of the DPRK remains the same as during the Kim Jong-Il period: to stabilize the Korean peninsula. Moreover, China's economic support during this period will also contribute to the peaceful power transition. With the support to the Kim Jong-Un, China's influence over the DPRK's future direction could be increased, and its potential influence the DPRK leader to reform. Likewise, China's DPRK policy derived from its theory to create a "harmonious world order," which could also offer China a chance for its peaceful rise.

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<sup>23</sup> Tim Beal. *Crisis In Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War* (London: Pluto Press 2011), 196.

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## Praying for Stability: A Russian Strategic Perspective on the Leadership Transition in North Korea

By Kristen Pue

### Potential Impact of Kim Jong II's Death on North Korea

It is common wisdom that authoritarian regimes are often most unstable during succession between leaders; it is difficult to transfer the requisite knowledge, experience and notoriety onto a new person. Thus, rulers typically identify a successor years before they expect to hand over power, allowing both the heir apparent and the public to grow accustomed to his new role. It was known for more than 17 years that Kim Jong II would succeed Kim Il Sung, for example; Kim Jong II was placed in a number of government positions, including the first vice chairmanship of North Korea's National Defence Commission (NDC) in 1980, allowing him to learn skills necessary for leading the country.<sup>1</sup> Kim Jong Un is much less experienced; he was only officially announced as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) next chosen leader in September 2010, and has no formal government training.<sup>2</sup> Still, by all accounts the transition has proceeded smoothly; elites kept the death of Kim Jong II a secret for forty-eight hours, suggesting a coordinated effort. Evidence thus far submits that all elite groups have a stake in maintaining the

status quo and are acting accordingly.<sup>3</sup> Kim Jong Un's inexperience makes it likely that military elites and his uncle, Jang Song-Taek, will exercise most real power in the new regime's early years.<sup>4</sup>

There are four potential outcomes of the transition: total regime collapse or revolution; continuation of the status quo; concessions and a more favourable disposition towards the west; or, a less favourable disposition towards the west and subsequent isolationism. Most experts speculate that North Korea will isolate itself for several months, in order to solidify the new regime.<sup>5</sup> The new regime will need to manage transition in a time of "weakening internal cohesion and influence among North Korean institutions, the relatively rapid penetration of external information into North Korea,"<sup>6</sup> and deeply-rooted economic problems. Though still illegal, it is now broadly possible for North

<sup>1</sup> STRATFOR, "China Weighs its Options in North Korea's Leadership Transition," *STRATFOR Analysis Online*, 20 December 2011.

<sup>2</sup> STRATFOR, "North Korea After Kim Jong II," *STRATFOR Analysis Online*, 19 December 2011a.

<sup>3</sup> STRATFOR, "Dispatch: Kim Jong II's Death and North Korea's Transition," *STRATFOR Video Dispatch Online*, 19 December 2011b.

<sup>4</sup> STRATFOR, "North Korea After Kim Jong II"; The Economist, "Farewell, Earthlings." *The Economist: Asia – Banyan Online*, 19 December 2011, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/12/kim-jong-il>.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon, Jay and Entous, Adam, "The Death of Kim Jong II" Dictator's Demise Throws US Policy into Question," *The Wall Street Journal*. 20 December 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Snyder, Scott, "Kim Jong-II's Successor Dilemmas," *Washington Quarterly* 33.1 (2010): 36.

Koreans to telephone outsiders, for example.<sup>7</sup> Although some scholars had predicted that the leadership transition might see intense competition between elite factions,<sup>8</sup> it appears that the nation's elites have unified around the desire to maintain status quo stability.<sup>9</sup> Still, the possibility of failed succession looms.

### **Russian Involvement in the Koreas: An Overview**

The Korean War locked the Soviet Union into a one-sided policy in the Koreas; compelled to counterbalance American support of the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Soviet Union allied itself with the capricious North Korea. In the immediate post-World War Two period, the Soviet Union was North Korea's primary influencer.<sup>10</sup> Soviet association with the DPRK continued after the Sino-Soviet Split, manifested by the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Aid;<sup>11</sup> China and the Soviet Union maintained rough parity of influence

over North Korea in this period.<sup>12</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the pendulum swung dramatically towards the ROK. There are several explanations for this shift. First, Russia had initially identified Japan as an important regional power and potential source of investment,<sup>13</sup> adopting a flexible posture towards the northern territories, proposing demilitarisation and confirming the validity of the 1956 Joint Resolution in which the Soviet Union had promised to return the smaller islands. However, due to a combination of public outrage and naval security concerns,<sup>14</sup> Yeltsin and his foreign ministry shifted their policy.<sup>15</sup> This dispute was and continues to be a source of tension between Russia and Japan, prompting Russia to seek out improved relations with – among others – the ROK in the mid-1990s.<sup>16</sup> Another explanation for this is ideological; the new democratic government wished to distance itself from the DPRK's totalitarian regime, a direct descendant of Stalinism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Myers, B. R, "North Korea's State-Loyalty Advantage," *Journal Of International Affairs* 65.1 (2011): 115.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder.

<sup>9</sup> STRATFOR, "Dispatch: Kim Jong Il's Death and North Korea's Transition."

Toloraya, Georgy, "Russian Policy In Korea In A Time Of Change," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 21.1 (2009): 67-84.

<sup>10</sup> Joo, Seung-Ho, "Moscow-Pyongyang Relations Under Kim Jong-Il: Normalization And Beyond," *Conference Papers -- American Political Science Association* (2008): 1-28.

<sup>11</sup> Larisa Zabrovskaya, "The 1961 USSR-DPRK Treaty And Signing Of A New Russia—North Korean Treaty," *Korea & World Affairs* (2000): 440.

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<sup>12</sup> Joo.

<sup>13</sup> Peggy Falkenheim-Meyer, "Russia's Post-Cold War Security Policy In Northeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 67.4 (1994): 496.

<sup>14</sup> The island settlement would have created a situation where the American and Japanese navies could encircle the Sea of Okhotsk, thereby threatening Russia's ballistic missile carrying submarines (SSBNs) that are based there. For more on this, see Falkenheim Meyer, Peggy. "Moscow's Relations with Tokyo: Domestic Obstacles to a Territorial Agreement," *Asian Survey* (Oct 1993), vol. 3 no. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Falkenheim-Meyer, 498.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 506.

<sup>17</sup> Toloraya, 73.

Whatever the motivation for Russia's amity towards ROK in the 1990s, Russia has since realised the benefits of a multi-vector approach in the Koreas. Moscow-Pyongyang estrangement continued until 2000, when lessening of economic troubles at home prompted Kim Jong Il to "try new diplomatic overtures toward the outside world."<sup>18</sup> In particular, Kim Jong Il saw Vladimir Putin's ascendance to the presidency as a discontinuation from the Yeltsin government; concomitantly, Russia sought to restore its lost influence in the country,<sup>19</sup> adopting a new Foreign Policy concept in July 2000 which emphasized its intention to play a significant role in the Korean peace process and to seek balanced relations therein.<sup>20</sup> That same year, the two nations signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation.<sup>21</sup> In 2003, Russia became a part of the Six-Party Talks format, at Kim Jong Il's urging,<sup>22</sup> but the DPRK was disappointed when Russia joined sanctions against it in 2006. The current Russian approach to the Koreas has emphasized balance, economic cooperation, and non-proliferation.

### **Russian Interests in North Korea's Leadership Transition**

Aside from nuclear non-proliferation, Russian's interests in the Koreas are predominantly economic;

<sup>18</sup> Joo.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Nezavisimaya Gazeta, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, (2000): vol.50, no.17, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Joo.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid;

Toloraya.

above all else, the Russian Federation is interested in seeing a stable leadership transition. Since 2000, the nation has been successful in brokering economic cooperation between the two Koreas, in its own interests. In light of declining European demand following the 2008 financial crisis, Russian energy policy has taken on an Asian orientation.<sup>23</sup> South Korea has become one of the most important economic partners of Russia in Asia. Annual trade already exceeds US\$20 billion.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the 2008 summit between Russian President Medvedev and ROK President Lee led to an energy deal which is set to see nearly twenty percent of South Korean gas consumption imported from Russia by 2015, possibly by way of a pipeline through North Korea.<sup>25</sup> At an obvious level, Russia is looking for the DPRK to remain stable. Energy projects in North Korea would be stalled indefinitely, were the country to fail. Moreover, Russia is – like all other nations – concerned with what would

<sup>23</sup> Hongchan Chun, "Russia's Energy Diplomacy Toward Europe And Northeast Asia: A Comparative Study," *Asia Europe Journal* 7.2 (2009): 327-343; Sergey Sevastyanov, "The More Assertive And Pragmatic New Energy Policy in Putin's Russia: Security Implications For Northeast Asia," *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 25.1 (2008): 35-55. Gawdat Bahgat, "Russia's Oil And Gas Policy." *OPEC Energy Review* 34.3-4 (2010): 162-183.

<sup>24</sup> Toloraya.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid;

Government of Russia, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Korea," Moscow, September 29, 2008, <http://kremlin.ru/sdocs/themes.shtml#20700> 1.

happen to the DPRK's nuclear programme, should the country collapse.

Moreover, Russia has railway, pipeline and power-line projects under way in the Koreas, all of which rely on warming ROK-DPRK relations.<sup>26</sup> Moscow has continually promoted the Six Party negotiations and prevented them from breaking down, after the United States froze DPRK assets in 2007, for example.<sup>27</sup> The state's commitment to peace talks stems, ideologically, from a desire to promote a multipolar world order and, materially, from the economic interests that it has in the area.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, because of Moscow's balanced policy approach towards the Koreas, prolonged conflict between the ROK and DPRK would put the Russian foreign ministry in a very precarious position. Russia benefits economically from strong relations with the ROK; still, the DPRK is an important pillar of its foreign policy in order to both

undercut Chinese influence therein and as a counterweight to American and Japanese influence on the peninsula.<sup>29</sup> Were Moscow forced into a dichotomous scenario in the Koreas, its interests would be greatly hampered. Thus, Russia will be looking to keep tensions between the two countries at a minimum.

Finally, Russian energy interests are best served – at least in the short term – while North Korea and the United States remain at odds, insofar as stability persists. As regards energy policy, Moscow has been able to coax the DPRK into acting as a transit company for Russian oil to the ROK by offering financial aid, this year 100 million USD.<sup>30</sup> So long as it only has to compete for influence with China, who has a mutual interest in infrastructure projects of this sort,<sup>31</sup> the cost of influence in projects such as these is minimal. In the long term, the United States and Japan would both like to see improved relations between the two Koreas, but they may do this at the expense of Russian influence there, which the Kremlin fears.<sup>32</sup> In addition to stability, bereft of conflict with the ROK, Russia would prefer that Kim Jong Un's regime remain an international pariah, at least in the short term.

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<sup>26</sup> Interfax, "Moscow Hopes Pyongyang Will Observe Earlier Agreements," *Interfax: Russia & CIS Newswire*, 22 December 2011;

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Dina Khrennikova, "Russia Wants Korean Line by 2017," *International Gas Report*, 7 November 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Toloraya.

<sup>28</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, "A Multipolar World As Seen By Russia And China: International Challenges," *Far Eastern Affairs* 38.3 (2010): 1-13.

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<sup>29</sup> Leszek Buszynski, "Russia and North Korea: Dilemmas and Interests." *Asian Survey* 49.5 (2009): 809.

<sup>30</sup> Thai News Service, 21 November 2011; *The Economist*, 27 August 2011.

<sup>31</sup> STRATFOR, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Toloraya, 2009.

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