

The Kim is Dead! Long Live the Kim?

By Ralph A. Cossa

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Kim Jong-il is dead. This we pretty much know for sure. This, plus the revelation, which should have come as a surprise to no one, that the North Korean people are being called upon to “faithfully revere respectable comrade Kim Jong-un,” his third son and chosen “great successor.” Beyond this, we’re mostly guessing. Some guesses are pretty safe bets. The North announced that Kim died of a massive coronary; while other rumors are already starting – conspiracy theorists will have a field day with this one, given the opaque nature of North Korea – I tend to believe the announced time (Saturday AM, Korea time), place (on a train for a field guidance tour outside Pyongyang), and cause of death. One can even buy the story that the heart attack was brought about by “physical and mental overwork.” All reports had indicated that Kim was steadily recovering from his 2008 stroke and fully back at work; he did after all make multiple trips to China and Russia in the past few years. Heart attacks are nature’s way of telling you to slow down!

It’s also a pretty safe bet that Kim Jong-un has been accepted by the rest of the ruling elite as the official face of the new leadership, just as his father decreed. They have as much a vested interest in a stable power transition as junior Kim does; their own personal safety and survival is inextricably tied to regime survival and Kim Jong-un is the manifestation of this. It’s an even safer bet that Kim will not have the degree of absolute power and influence that his father did; no next generation leader ever does, especially if he is still in his 20s and largely untested and unknown.

Where the guessing really starts is in determining who the power(s) behind the throne will be: who will be whispering in his ear and to whom he will be listening? Kim Jong-il’s chosen regents – his brother-in-law Jang Sung-taek and sister Kim Kyong-Hui – are the odds-on favorites at least initially, but how trusted Jang really is remains to be seen. The military remains a power behind the throne but just how powerful and who speaks for the military are still not clear. As a result, no leadership picture is likely to be more over-analyzed than will be the line-up at Kim Jong-il’s December 29 memorial service, officiated over by Kim Jong-un. Old-time Kremlinologists will have a field day figuring out who is standing where and what it all means.

One thing we won’t have to guess about is who, if anyone, will officially represent the US or South Korea at the memorial service; no outside guests are being invited. This could be because the powers that be don’t think Kim Jong-un is ready yet for foreign scrutiny. It could (but probably doesn’t) mean that a serious power struggle is going on behind

the scenes. Or they might just be concerned no one of importance (other than some senior Chinese official) would show up. Or all (or none) of the above. Meanwhile, the debate in Washington and Seoul will center instead on what kind of condolence message should or shouldn’t be sent. I would vote for a carefully worded note from each, which focuses more on our collective willingness to engage in dialogue with the new leader while avoiding paying tribute to the old.

The real questions are, what does Kim Jong-il’s death mean in terms of North-South relations, the Six-Party Talks, eventual denuclearization, and the prospects for reform? My guess is that Pyongyang had a game plan essentially in place taking them through not only the April 15 100th anniversary of founder Kim Il-sung’s birth but the US and ROK presidential elections in November and December respectively, and that the new leadership, after a respectable pause for mourning, will proceed along that charted course. Kim Jong-il did not choose his successors because he thought they would change direction but because he expected them to stay the course. It would be extremely bold for any new leader or leadership team to veer too far from the chosen path, at least initially.

What the chosen path really is remains anyone’s guess. It likely includes another round of US-DPRK talks (which otherwise would have taken place this week) and, presumably, another round of North-South dialogue, followed by the eventual resumption of Six-Party Talks in late spring or early summer. If rumors of a US food aid for uranium enrichment freeze deal are indeed true – this was reported in the Korean press (not always the most reliable source of intelligence) but thus far denied officially by Washington – then the North will likely go along with this at some point. However, we should have no illusions that the best we will get is a freeze at the known facility at Yongbyon, and not at the suspected but not acknowledged additional facilities elsewhere.

While Six-Party Talks are likely to resume at some point, their stated intent – denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula – will remain a pipedream. Before Kim’s death there was a less than one percent chance Pyongyang was prepared to negotiate away its nuclear weapons program. Today there is a considerably less than less than one percent chance.

If the objective of the Six-Party Talks is Korean Peninsula denuclearization and we are all pretty well convinced that the North is not going to give up its nuclear weapons anytime soon, then why does everyone seem to want to go back to the negotiating table? The most direct answer is because no one has come up with a better solution that is acceptable to all parties.

It’s also true that if you “won’t buy the same horse twice” – Washington’s favorite phrase, even though most North Korean horses have been bought more than once – then you

really can't start again from scratch. There is an important framework in place that has been bought and paid for – the September 2005 Joint Statement – and no one wants to try to recreate (or repurchase) this agreement.

It used to be that the Six-Party Talks were aimed at making things better (i.e., denuclearization); now the objective, should they resume, will likely be confined to keeping things from getting worse. The proper atmosphere – the appearance of progress, even if none is actually achieved – is also becoming more compelling, especially as election year approaches for many of the players.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing for abandonment of the six-party process. Stopping things from getting worse is a useful, perhaps even critical objective. But we need to be realistic about what we are trying to accomplish if and when talks resume and must understand that the “same bed, different dreams” phenomenon will be greatly magnified, even (or especially) if Kim Jong-un's dreams are the same as his father's.

There is an assertion that when the North Koreans are talking, they are not shooting at people. I'm not sure how accurate that assertion actually is, but it's clear that ever since the North's spate of bad behavior last year – the sinking of the Cheonan and the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island – people have been waiting for the next shoe to drop.

There is also rampant speculation that the new leadership will have to establish its bona fides by doing something aggressive. I don't buy this logic. In fact, while I understand why the ROK and US military have increased their alert status in response to Kim's death, my guess is that this would be the best time for the respective militaries to enjoy Christmas leave. The odds that the new leadership would do something provocative during the mourning period or during the transition period that follows seem particularly low.

In short, the most likely future path, at least initially, will be more of the same. The North will cautiously continue down the path laid out by Kim Jong-il, including a resumption of US-DPRK and North-South dialogue, leading to a resumption of Six-Party Talks, where they will once again attempt to get us to buy the same horses for a third or fourth time, while throwing in at least one new horse – the already revealed portion of their uranium enrichment program – for sale.

Over the long term, there appears to be some hope, primarily emanating from Beijing, that Kim Jong-un will, if he listens well to regent Jang Sung-taek, take North Korea down the path of Chinese-style reform. Beijing, as expected, has heaped praise on Kim Jong-il's memory and expressed unqualified support for Kim Jong-un's leadership, in part because of China's central concern over stability on the Peninsula, but apparently also based on the belief that Jang is or will be a “reformer.” Who knows, this may be true. While this could relieve the suffering of the North Korean people over time, it will do little to promote the cause of denuclearization, however. This will remain a long-term challenge and one that will remain a lower priority for Beijing and Pyongyang, even as it continues to drive US and ROK policy.

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