

Responses to PacNet #1R – North Korea: What Not to Do

Editor's note: We encourage give and take among our readers. In this spirit, we are keeping the Victor Cha-Evans Revere debate going for a second and concluding round, while also adding some additional feedback from readers Joe Bosco and Carole Shaw.

Joseph Bosco, National Security Consultant:

I defer to the experts who are debating the likely and/or desirable near-term direction of North Korea's transition from the second to the third generation of the glorious Kim family. Victor Cha calls the stability prediction "optimistic" but worries that it won't happen because someone will do something untoward. Evans Revere, on the other hand, expresses hopes but dreams for the collapse scenario.

All agree that China's role is pivotal. Victor observes that during Pyongyang's transition, "Beijing should not allow itself to be seen as an advocate of keeping the peninsula divided . . . [I]t would hurt Beijing's long-term position in the region dramatically if it were seen as the last great power to support a divided Korea."

Of course, that is precisely what China has been doing for almost 60 years, after its joint aggression with Pyongyang failed to unite the peninsula under Communist rule. Nor has its anti-unification posture damaged Beijing's long-term status in the region, or globally — e.g., Beijing Olympics, and other manifestations of regional and international acceptance.

On the contrary, it has enabled China to play good cop to North Korea's bad cop and to be accorded the prestige and power as a "responsible stakeholder" in the Six-Party Talks and other international forums. Beijing's role in protecting Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile programs has been insidious, and successful.

As Ralph Cossa notes correctly: "The cause of denuclearization . . . will remain a lower priority for Beijing and Pyongyang, even as it continues to drive US and ROK policy." (**PacNet #70 Tuesday, December 20, 2011, "The Kim is Dead! Long Live the Kim?"**) That's putting it mildly — ending the North's nuclear weapons program has never been an objective of either Communist government.

Going forward, Evans Revere says we can use North Korea's uncertain and bleak future "to our advantage when the time comes to press Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions." But that will require our pressing China much harder to use its own leverage over Pyongyang and to stop playing the "collapse and refugee flow" card. Beijing can hardly want to avoid that disastrous scenario more than Pyongyang itself does. Would North Korea really choose regime destruction over giving up its nuclear program and gaining virtually unlimited economic aid? China has never

compelled it to make that choice. Nor has the West demanded that China do so.

Carole C. Shaw, Black Mountain, NC:

I am surprised that the PacNet articles upon which PacNet #1R are based could be perceived as "two schools of thought" on pre and post Kim Jong II. Rather I read it as a different point of view (in degree) to the same situation. As to the post death events, which were carried out in an orderly fashion with an obvious eye for world export on television, it is no surprise.

I do not see how Victor can deduce from Evans's article that his position is "optimistic" and he is asserting that the North Koreans have it all under control. He clearly states that the long-term game is at stake and therein lie all the unknowns, pitfalls, and dangers of which all can agree.

Obviously no one can predict the future, especially in a situation like this. And all concerned parties do well to move forward as prudently as possible; or even sideways, which seems to more often be the case with North Korea. However, there is one consideration which I would take a look at in the big picture. I interviewed a high-profile North Korean defector (through an interpreter) in Seoul some years ago, who was adamant that Kim (father and son) were not regarded as "gods" in North Korea.

He was equally emphatic that North Korea communism is based on a dialectical materialism world view, as is all communism, and no one believes that man has a spirit and that there is anything left after death. He equated the two Kims cult-like personality to the need for North Korean corporate identity as a nation; the fact that everyone is watching everyone else under massive surveillance had kept it in place.

We should not forget that the Korean nation did not act together against the Japanese seizure of their country in 1905, until 14 years later, in 1919 although there was great individual resistance and the formation of various militant groups. Why 1919? I am of the opinion that a powerful spirit of resistance and desire for independence so swept the nation upon learning of the death of their last legal monarch, Emperor Kojong, of a monarchy that was over 500 year old in January of 1919 that they were willing to defy the illegitimate and oppressive authority that was over them. Girls, young women, boys, men all rose up in such corporate unity that the Japanese responded with intense brutality. But the spirit of the Korean people was not conquered as we all know.

If the time comes, and I believe it will, sooner rather than later, when enough North Koreans realize they are in a trap and that there is a better way home, we may witness the dissolution of the Kim Cult with the same velocity Chairman Mao faded away. Is it dangerous? Extremely. But given the condition of the North Korean people and their very thin military, war and chaos is the last thing anyone wants. Has the

“mandate of heaven,” an ancient concept that no self-respecting communist would ever admit to believing in, fallen? That, we must all surely agree, we will have to wait for in patience to find out. However, no one should underestimate the alertness of the ROK leadership to their situation.

Evans Revere, Nonresident Senior Fellow for Foreign Policy, Brookings Institution:

B.R Myers has some interesting and important things to say in his book about the treatment of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung as “Gods.” He also has a lot to say about the unique nature of North Korea “socialism” that differs somewhat from this defector’s version of things.

As for the issue of “optimism”, I stand guilty as charged of being an “optimist” about the following things: The house of cards that Kim Jong Il built is not sustainable; the real challenge for Kim Jong Un’s regime is not managing the succession and internal politics, but figuring out how to preserve a dying system; the North is rapidly running out of options; in only a few years’ time, Kim Jong Un will need to make some critical decisions about the future of his country; making the wrong decisions will almost certainly bring about the end of the regime. In short, Kim Jong Un is playing a very weak hand. His father played such a hand masterfully for many years, but I think we now know all of the tricks. This will not end well for the DPRK. We need to start getting ready for the end game.

Victor Cha, Senior Adviser and Korea Chair at CSIS:

How does one analytically separate the succession process from the viability of the regime? If the succession is as successful as Evans thinks, does that not say something about the legitimacy of dynastic succession, Kim Jong Un’s legitimacy and control of the military, and the overall viability of the existing system? Isn’t succession one of the key tests of the post-Kim Jong Il system? If it fails, the system fails. I don’t see how you can have both — unless one is saying that in the long run, North Korea will die — but we are all dead in the long run. That is not analytically useful.

In the end, Evans does not disagree with my overall assessment. He just thinks they are handling the succession well while I think the rushed succession is part of their overall demise. The leadership succession is an integral part of the effort to preserve a dying system. If the succession is successful, that gives the system more chances to survive than if the succession fails. He thinks the succession is successful, but believes that the regime eventually will die. Yes, in the long run, we are all dead.

Evans Revere’s last word:

The viability of the succession process is obviously an important factor determining the ultimate viability of the regime, but it’s hardly the only factor (more on this below). If the succession process were not going well (and by this I mean from the North Korean regime’s perspective), then we would have good reason to question the regime’s near-term prospects. But as I’ve been saying, all of the signs suggest stability and continuity.

As for the “legitimacy” of dynastic succession, I hold my nose at what’s going on, but it doesn’t matter what I or other outsiders think — all that matters to the regime, at least in the near term, is whether the regime has been able to “sell” the dynastic succession to its people, to the ruling elite, and to the military. On all fronts, they seem to be succeeding. Kim Jong Un was named as successor by Kim Jong Il, and that is the most powerful “legitimizing” factor working in his favor. The all-important military seems to have bought into the succession (what choice did they have if the only basis for legitimacy in North Korea is the Kim family, and Kim Jong Il anointed his son as his successor?). If succession is a test of post-Kim Jong Il stability (and I believe it is in the short term), then so far the regime is passing the test. But that’s not the regimes only challenge.

In the longer run (2-3 years), even if Kim Jong Un continues to consolidate his power, he will need to face the systemic challenges (and prospects for systemic failure) that his father managed to put off by so skillfully manipulating relations with his neighbors and with us, extracting just enough aid to keep the house of cards from collapsing. The United States, the ROK, and Japan show no signs of being willing to play the old game, however, and the North’s ability to extract “tangible benefits” from us at the negotiating table in exchange for hollow or reversible promises has now encountered the cold reality posed by the fact that we know their game. As a result, the ongoing de-industrialization of the North, its fraying agricultural infrastructure, its failed economic policies, its disastrous currency reform, and much more are almost certainly going to raise bigger questions about the systemic viability of the North. Kim Jong Un may be on his way to passing the “succession test”, but there are serious doubts (at least in my mind) about his ability to pass this one. Hence my “pessimism” about North Korea’s prospects or, put another way, my “optimism” about the position that we and our allies and partners are in in the medium term.

We have a different view about the “success” of the succession. We probably also have a different view about the factors that will bring about the North’s demise. As I’ve been saying since the day after Kim Jong Il’s death, the bill for the regime’s failures, distortions, and bad policies will come due on Kim Jong-Un’s watch. We’d better start readying ourselves for that day.

Finally, like any veteran North Korea watcher, I am always prepared to be wrong. I thought Rudiger Frank, one of the best in the business and someone whom I believe agrees with my assessment of the succession process, put it wonderfully the other day in his article reminding us all to be humble in our analyses and think about the possibility that we might be wrong. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t question my analysis. This exchange has provided a valuable opportunity for self-reflection.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.