

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

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Victor's analysis is intriguing but I would offer another perspective. Every veteran analyst of North Korea I've spoken to (including several inside the US and ROK governments) sees the transition as carefully planned and well executed, not "rushed" and "sudden." I am curious what he bases his assessment on.

The DPRK has been working on the transition process since before Kim Jong Il took ill in August 2008, and intensively since then. While the DPRK would no doubt have wanted more time to prepare, 40 months enabled them to achieve much, as was evident in the North Korean Workers' Party's endorsement of Kim Jong Un in October 2010 and the massive parade (attended by a Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee member) that introduced Kim Jong Un as the heir apparent.

The revelations about North Korean doctors getting urgent medical training in Houston to deal with heart, diabetes, and other diseases that we believe Kim Jong Il was suffering from a couple of years back underscores the fact that the North Koreans have known for some time that they were dealing with a serious and deteriorating situation (and the pictures and video footage of Kim Jong Il over the past two years reinforced this), which provided plenty of incentive for them to ready the succession plan well in advance.

I continue to be impressed at how well the North is choreographing things, down to the fascinating images of Kim Jong Un holding hands with his generals and slapping the backs of his troops as he laughs with them. The recent suggestions that he may have had a hand in the 2009 missile and nuclear tests (as some of us believed at the time) also suggest that the new leader has been aggressively learning his new portfolio for some time. Some of us had expected to see Kim Jong Un acting nervously around the military and looking uncomfortable in his own skin, and I would have taken this as a sign that things might be in flux and that real change might be possible. What I've seen so far is the exact opposite.

Victor says our allies haven't "recognized" Kim Jong Un as the new leader. The record suggests the contrary, and both Seoul and Tokyo seem keen to do business with him. The press reports of a DPRK-Japan meeting in Beijing earlier this week suggest that Tokyo is eager to re-open dialogue with the North. And Seoul has not only acknowledged that Kim Jong Un is in charge, the ROK president and his leadership team have been going out of their way to signal hope for a better relationship with him. Toward this end the ROK has been using every available channel, including the Blue House, to call for a resumption of dialogue.

Meanwhile, no one in the ROK, except perhaps for a few retired generals, is calling for the ROK government to take advantage of the transition by acting aggressively. Quite the contrary! President Lee Myung-bak has been quite solicitous of DPRK sensitivities in his comments, and his new unification minister has been even more so.

I spend my nights dreaming and hoping that one or all of Victor's scenarios will be true and that I will wake up in the morning and North Korea will have collapsed or will have been absorbed (hopefully by the ROK). Then I wake up and discover that the North Korean regime is still there. Hope springs eternal but it doesn't change the harsh reality we face. But it does lend support to Victor's good advice for Beijing. (For more on this author's views on the North Korean leadership transition, see **PacNet #70A: Dealing With North Korea's New Leader: Getting it Right, 12/27/11.**)

Ralph Cossa, President, Pacific Forum, CSIS

As I said in my analysis of the leadership transition in North Korea (**PacNet #70: The Kim is Dead! Long Live the Kim? 12/20/11**) when it comes to North Korea, we're all guessing. The problem with watching events unfold behind such an opaque screen is that every event is subject to numerous interpretations. We know neither of Kim Jong Un's older brothers were in evidence during the funeral. Does this mean he was too weak and insecure to allow them to attend . . . or that he is so firmly in command that they feared for their lives if they showed up . . . or both? I put myself in the group that thinks the North is "methodically carrying out the power transition step-by-step," and is most likely in coming months to follow the blueprint laid out by Kim Jong Il. Washington should respond to this pragmatically, the same as if Kim Jong Il were still in power.

Victor's advice to China is sound, but I doubt that he (or anyone else) thinks Beijing will follow it. The Chinese have clearly cast their lot with Kim Jong Un and this should not surprise anyone who has watched Chinese behavior in the months leading up to the Dear Leader's coronary. The date was a surprise; the event certainly was not!

I worry little about unilateral ROK actions. One of the real strong points of the Lee and Obama administrations has been the level of coordination and trust existing between the two. Regardless of who wins in November (in the US) or December (in the ROK), this personal dynamic will have to be rebuilt. So there is a real window of opportunity to move forward jointly now in dealing with the North that should not be squandered regardless of the leadership change in Pyongyang.

Victor Cha Responds

There are clearly emerging two schools of thought on “post-Kim Jong Il” North Korea. “Optimists” who see the North as having all their ducks lined up neatly and implementing the succession plan like a two-minute drill at the end of a football game. Then there are “pessimists” who think they do not have a well-planned process and/or will encounter serious problems given the premature death of Kim.

For optimists like Evans, I think the real question for is where they would place their longer-term bet. I think it is rather easy and safe for optimists to say that in the short-term, it looks as though the DPRK is holding things together — e.g., good funeral, nice pictures of Kim Jong Un on a white horse, and laughing with the military. Sure, this gives the impression that all is okay inside of Pyongyang (after all, that is what they *want* the world to believe, isn't it?).

The real analytic question for optimists is whether they believe this is sustainable over the long-term. Do optimists truly believe that the North will carry forth with junior Kim without missing a beat and will rule without problems for the foreseeable future?

Regarding “sources” in the US and ROK governments, I guess we just talk to different people. And my understanding on the Japan contact is that this was a terribly overblown press story about Nakai's trip to Beijing.

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