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What Now? The Case for U.S.-ROK-PRC Coordination on North Korea by Michael J. Finnegan

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We are once again faced with seemingly informed speculation as to the health of both Kim Jong Il and the North Korean regime. The news that Kim may have suffered a stroke or some other serious and potentially debilitating condition, and the fact that we know so little about the succession issues, though, shines a light on several important points for the policy communities in Washington, Seoul, Beijing and elsewhere.

For Washington, it drives home the obvious: the U.S. does not have a firm handle on what goes on inside North Korea. The hardest of all "hard targets," North Korea poses an incredibly difficult set of questions for both policy and military planners alike. The less obvious conclusion is that the U.S. should do everything in its power to mitigate this knowledge deficit by developing clear understandings with potential partners on how we, as a group, would respond to any instability that might arise from Kim Jong Il's death or incapacitation.

In the end, how things play out inside North Korea will have much more to do with internal power dynamics and the presence of an accepted succession plan than what the U.S. and others do. However, a clear international response, led by the most involved parties, could do much to contain and minimize the potential that leadership confusion in North Korea will lead to instability on the peninsula and in the region. Secondarily, though, such international cooperation could have a positive shaping effect on how the ultimate resolution of any instability situation impacts ongoing nuclear discussions as well as broader security in the region.

The United States, South Korea, and China have a clear interest in developing cooperative understandings regarding their individual and collective response to any instability in North Korea. From Seoul's perspective, avoiding a complete short-term meltdown of the North Korean regime is arguably the primary goal. Perhaps less obviously, Korea also has an interest in limiting the role of "foreign powers" in any intervention; that is to say, while understanding it alone could not manage large-scale instability, Seoul will want to limit the scope and duration of both Chinese and U.S. direct involvement.

From a U.S. perspective, to the extent that the demise of the North Korean regime could spill over into instability or worse and involve both U.S. troops on the peninsula and elsewhere, it will support Seoul's goal of crisis mitigation. However, the U.S. concern for a potential "loose nukes" scenario, involving either nuclear materials or other documented North Korean WMD holdings, must be addressed and may demand action.

For Beijing, any instability in the region is to be avoided, if only for economic reasons. However, from a more strategic standpoint, it too has an interest in limiting the role of the U.S. in an instability scenario.

The key element to achieving any of these goals, and the missing ingredient in the policy discussion, is coordination among the three. To be blunt, there has been no substantive discussion at any level between the three governments on how they will coordinate to manage instability in North Korea. The laundry list of issues that need to be discussed is long, but that discussion cannot take place absent firm, but quiet, political agreement that this is a common concern that requires a common approach. Such a discussion need not take place at the senior level – indeed, it is best to avoid "politics" and focus on the technical aspects of managing a potential crisis: where does coordination take place, who has "lead" for important areas (e.g.., delivery of humanitarian assistance), and other more mundane issues of the political-military coordination of a potential international response. This more technical focus at the mid-level would lead to improved understandings without raising the specter of a tripartite intervention.

Japan has significant concerns as well. However, direct Japanese involvement in a discussion of the future stability of the peninsula will, unfortunately, be less than useful. Acknowledging this, the U.S.-Japan alliance provides Japan an effective, albeit less direct, channel to shape the situation. Quiet bilateral diplomacy will be a key to managing Japanese concerns.

Kim Jong Il may be alive and well. We may find he is ill, but will recover and continue to lead the regime. However, eventually we will face the real succession, and the United States and its Korean ally need to work together with the Chinese to ensure that when that day comes our response is cooperative, vice competitive. The Six-Party Talks have opened up new opportunities for dialogue between the U.S., China, and others. This opportunity, heightened by the near-term speculation over Kim's health, should be taken advantage of not only during this current situation, but to plan for future contingencies as well.