

Dealing with North Korea's New Leader: Getting it Right

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The sudden death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has introduced an element of uncertainty into a diplomatic process that appeared to be close to bringing about the resumption of six-party denuclearization talks. While Kim's demise creates a new dynamic and the leadership transition in Pyongyang raises important questions, it hardly warrants the dire warnings of North Korean adventurism, implosion, or near-term collapse that have been issued by some analysts and commentators. Fortunately, the Obama administration is playing its cards carefully and well, and is disregarding the bad advice it is getting from some quarters.

By all accounts, meetings between US and North Korean diplomats, the latest between US envoy Ambassador Robert King and DPRK Ambassador Ri Gun in Beijing earlier this month, produced an agreement in principle to resume US food aid. Importantly, this would be in exchange for Pyongyang's acceptance of key US preconditions for resuming the Six-Party Talks, including the freezing of the DPRK's uranium enrichment activities. When news broke of Kim's death, the United States and North Korea were on the verge of holding a meeting to confirm these understandings and chart a course back to multilateral denuclearization talks, where shutting down and dismantling North Korea's entire range of nuclear weapons activities would be the goal.

However, some pundits are now suggesting that Kim Jong-il's death has changed everything. They are calling for a reconsideration of diplomacy, as if they have already concluded that it will be next to impossible for the United States to do business with the North's new leader. They are questioning whether Kim Jong-un is really in charge and suggesting that the DPRK is on the verge of collapse. Other alarmists are claiming that the new leader may soon be ousted by a military coup or by rival family members. Some have claimed that China is about to "absorb" North Korea, and others are breathlessly urging the US to ready contingency plans to deal with the North's imminent collapse, or to prepare for an onslaught of military provocations by the North.

We all need to take a deep breath. There's enough breast-beating, sobbing, and out-of-control emotions happening on the streets of Pyongyang. We need to understand where things actually stand in North Korea, and where the United States stands in its ties with the regime in Pyongyang.

For all the questions, there's no mystery about who the North Korean leader is. Kim Jong-un is a young, 28-year-old,

Swiss-educated man with little government, military, or party experience, but who possesses the one essential qualification for running North Korea – he is his late father's son. He has been groomed for leadership since his father suffered a stroke in the summer of 2008, and the North Korea's Workers' Party and the DPRK's military have blessed his designation, exactly as his late father wished.

North Korea has been diligently arranging the succession since Kim Jong-il's illness. Besides arranging Kim Jong-un's on-the-job training, the regime has made many systemic changes, including a newly empowered Party Military Commission, and has carried out personnel reshuffles, including the replacement of key military leaders and the retirement of older Party cadres, to ensure that the young leader would have a supportive environment.

The loyalty of all key elements of the regime was tested in this process. We can be reasonably confident that any potential opposition was weeded out in a manner that has a long and effective history in the North. The new faces that are increasingly being seen in the leadership ranks, particularly among the military, testify to this, and to the fact that the new leader's "people" now occupy key positions.

Key Kim family members, whose own legitimacy and survivability derive from Kim Jong-un's, were strategically placed in the hierarchy by Kim Jong-il to advise and assist his son. Any action by them or the military to violate the late leader's wishes and remove the young Kim would deprive them and the regime of the sole basis for legitimacy in the North Korean system.

The smoothness and swiftness with which the announcement of Kim Jong-il's death was made, the funeral and mourning arrangements that were announced, and the statements of undying loyalty to the successor that were promulgated are all the product of the careful preparatory work done since 2008. Kim Jong-il's death may have been sudden, but it was hardly unanticipated. The steps being taken by the North to deal with his demise reflect a high degree of order and control.

China has endorsed the succession and sees the young Kim, rightly or wrongly, as the best hope for implementing Chinese-style economic reforms. The presence of Chinese Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee member and public security expert Zhou Yongkang on the reviewing stand at the massive parade in Pyongyang that marked the young Kim's "coming out party" in October 2010 sent an important message of support. And Beijing has reaffirmed its endorsement in a high-profile announcement made on Dec. 20. But to suggest that North Korea is about to be "absorbed" by China shows a disregard for the legacy of 2,000 years of Korean history and a lack of understanding of the virulent nationalism that characterizes today's North Korea.

As for the specter of the North's collapse and the viability of the young Kim's leadership, Kim Jong-un inherits a country that is more isolated and impoverished than ever, that is burdened with severe international economic sanctions, and whose industrial infrastructure is literally crumbling. It cannot long continue on this path. While he will likely (and necessarily, in order not to tarnish his father's legacy) emphasize continuity at the outset of his rule, the young Kim will have to face the cold reality of the North's predicament and either take the DPRK on a new path or risk collapse. The decisive moment for North Korea will happen on his watch.

Is he up to the task? Kim Jong-un's youth and inexperience are liabilities, but it is worth remembering how many times the North has been written off over the years, and yet there it is, defiant and dangerous.

Will the young Kim carry out new provocations to enhance his authority and credibility inside the DPRK? He has already checked this box. The missile and nuclear tests of 2009 and the attacks on South Korea in 2010 have all the earmarks of an effort to demonstrate to the world, and to the North Korean people, that the "young general" is a force to be reckoned with. But now that he is in power, the new leader seems unlikely to risk the almost certain counterpunch that would result from another attack on the South. And actions against the United States would result in an even darker, poorer, and more isolated future for the North, or worse. China, we are told, has also made clear its strong opposition to North Korean military adventurism. The new leader needs time to consolidate his power, not a near-term confrontation with his neighbors.

And what about talks with the United States and South Korea? Is the young Kim about to change the North's agenda? I think not. Kim Jong-un was part of his father's inner circle as the late leader directed his regime to re-engage with the United States and the ROK to bring about the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. That move was necessitated by the urgent need to ease the North's isolation, remove international sanctions, and seek food to meet its people's needs in the all-important anniversary year of 2012. With Kim Jong-il's death, nothing has changed in terms of those requirements.

So what should Washington do? The path ahead is obvious. The United States and the ROK have taken low-key, prudent steps to enhance military readiness, but at the same time have carefully avoided rattling any sabers. North Korean officials have signaled to the United States that the funeral and mourning protocols require a pause in current talks, and that is to be expected. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a carefully worded statement to the North Korean people and their leader that conveyed a superb combination of reassurance and compassion, while also clearly underscoring US goals and concerns. Having reached out to the North in this way, the United States is now adopting a careful wait-and-see posture, avoiding the hasty judgments and intemperate steps that some are arguing for.

I do not have a crystal ball that can predict where North Korea will be in two or three years' time. But I think I know where the DPRK is today. It is a country that is implementing a carefully calibrated succession game plan while eyeing an

uncertain and bleak future. If we are wise, prudent, and keep our wits about us, we can use this to our advantage when the time comes to press Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions.

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