



The 3 A.M. Phone Call: Pyongyang

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It is often said that American presidencies are remembered as much for how they deal with the unexpected as with the expected. That is, incoming presidents have agendas that they had stumped on throughout the campaign and come into office only to find their attention swept away by unforeseen events that would later define their presidencies. For George W. Bush, this was September 11. For Barack Obama, it was arguably the financial meltdown. For the next administration, this potentially could be a crisis in North Korea.

North Korea meets the definition of an obscure issue for a new administration. Not much is known about the regime. Pyongyang gets uppity every once in a while, but usually some diplomacy and a small amount of food or energy is enough to satiate the impoverished regime. Its nuclear weapons programs remain the main concern, but any new president, with a long to-do list, is unlikely to seek resolution of this problem as a top priority. Yet, before the next president finishes his term, North Korea may explode or implode in a way that will be impossible to ignore.

Two potential dynamics are at work, both related to the sudden death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011 and the fragile handover of power to his 20-something son, Kim Jong-un. This youngest son of the Kim dynasty was being groomed to take over but had barely 20 months to prepare before his father's heart attack. (By comparison, his father had 20 years to prepare to take over after his father's death in July 1994.) Suddenly thrust onto center stage in a dark

kingdom that has only known rule by a single larger-than-life leader, the junior Kim is doing all he can to puff up his credentials. He has been seen standing somewhat reluctantly before thousands of allegiance-pledging citizens. Like his father and grandfather, he has been doing on-site inspections with everyone from farmers to soldiers, all in an effort to conjure up the same images of the first great leader of North Korea, Kim Il-sung. Propaganda makers have drawn constant comparisons between the grandson and the grandfather, and the junior Kim has been made physically to look like the Great Leader, donning the same hairstyle as Kim Il-sung and the 1960s-era Mao communist suits.

The danger for the next American president is that this new leader may undertake dangerous actions in trying to close his domestic credibility gap. Of course, belligerence and unpredictability are North Korea's codes of conduct, but this young fellow may miscalculate and push things too far. While there is less likelihood that he might act out against the United States to build his bona fides, he may take aggressive actions against South Korea. The danger here is that, should another conservative government win power in the December 2012 elections, South Korea is not going to remain passive in response to another North Korean provocation. After the North Korean sinking of a South Korean naval vessel in March 2010 and the artillery shelling of a South Korean island, Seoul has made clear to all that, like a kid sucker-punched in the schoolyard, it is waiting for an opportunity to strike back. This threat concerned the Chinese so much that in 2011 Beijing contacted Kim Jong-il to warn North Korea not to take actions that could escalate into a shooting war. The problem today is that we do not know if the hot-headed and not yet 30-year-old leader reads signals the same way as his father. Should he miscalculate and carry out another provocation as a way to extort food and energy from his richer

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neighbor, the next American president could see things heat up on the peninsula extremely quickly and extremely lethally.

The second potential danger is that the junior Kim simply may not be able to hold the system together. Some see the relatively smooth transition to Kim Jong-un since the death of the father and conclude that a stable transition is underway. These same analysts point to the fact that North Korea survived after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. The problem is that 2012 is not 1994. Not only has Kim Jong-un had less time to prepare, but North Korean society is fundamentally different from what it was in 1994. Out of the famine of the 1990s grew markets—both black markets and official ones—that the North Korean people needed to survive when the government's rationing system broke down without any food to supply. This market mentality created an independence of mind among the North Korean people that has now been growing for nearly 20 years. But at the same time that society is becoming more independent minded, the politics of the country is becoming more hardline. In order to establish the new leader, the regime is resurrecting a harder line ideology to maintain political control. This is an unsustainable situation in the long term.

Like the Arab Spring, we do not know what incident will be the trigger. Could it be a similar self-immolation of a shopkeeper in a market? It was only after the turmoil in Egypt and Tunisia that analysts concluded that the conditions for upheaval were apparent. With the death of the all-important leader in December 2011, the economic depravity, the hardening of politics, and the loosening of society, all the conditions for a crumbling of the family-based, cult-of-personality leadership system that has ruled the country for the past 60 years are evident.

That 3 a.m. phone call, which every president dreads, could be Pyongyang calling. ■