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Kim Jong-il's Successor Dilemmas

In the fall of 2008, Kim Jong-il failed to appear at major events celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Subsequent international media speculation regarding his health prompted the DPRK in October and early November of 2008 to release photos, many of which had clearly been doctored, in an unsuccessful attempt to quell the rumors. Later in November 2008, inspections led by the Korean People's Army of the Kaesong Industrial Zone and restricted South Korean access to the zone the following December prompted more speculation about North Korea's leadership: Who was in charge? Who would be? Although Kim Jong-il met with Communist Party of China's international liaison head, Wang Jiarui, in January 2009 on the eve of the lunar new year holidays, there were still lingering doubts about Kim Jong-il's condition.

By spring 2009, the beginning of an official process to designate a successor appeared to unfold. In an April meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), the National Defense Commission was expanded to include new representation from a variety of public security agencies and to include Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek. Internal propaganda mechanisms were also mobilized to glorify the short resume of Kim Jong-il's third son, Kim Jong-un. Increasingly, signs emerged that the 27-year-old Kim Jong-un had been formally designated as Kim Jong-il's successor.

Over the summer of 2009, however, it became clear that Kim Jong-il's health had improved. In August, he met with both former president Bill Clinton and chairperson of Hyundai Asan, Hyun Jung-eun. During this same time frame, propaganda to support

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Kim Jong-un as the successor mysteriously and suddenly halted, raising additional questions about who might replace Kim Jong-il as North Korea's leader and how the succession process might play out. These developments have only added to uncertainty about the timing and outcome of the North Korean political leadership succession process. These doubts are important because assumptions about the viability of the Kim Jong-il regime will influence the Obama administration's policy options and decisions to manage U.S.–DPRK relations in the ongoing crisis.

Many analysts may look back at North Korea's previous father-to-son succession in 1994 following the death of North Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung. That experience could provide a new leader with some lessons for how to manage the succession process. Circumstances, however, have changed in the DPRK since 1994, arguably making the task of managing a succession process today even more difficult than it was during the mid-1990s. It is unlikely that the next North Korean leader will be nearly as well-trained as Kim Jong-il was to take the reins of power, and North Korea's internal cohesion faces a broad array of challenges that Kim Jong-il did not face at the time of Kim Il-sung's death. The next North Korean leader will have to manage weakening internal cohesion and influence among North Korean institutions, the relatively rapid penetration of external information into North Korea, and a greater reliance on external parties for economic support. These, among other factors, pose unprecedented challenges during the succession process to a third generation of Kim dynasty leaders.

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For Washington, while it may be tempting to focus on the near-term challenge of renewing and conducting nuclear negotiations, long-term U.S. objectives through this potentially volatile transition are equally important. There are three major challenges that any leadership in North Korea faces, and will continue to face in the foreseeable future. First, how will Pyongyang address the dilemma posed by North Korea's unilateral declaration as a nuclear weapons state while simultaneously seeking to manage political relations with major powers, including the United States? Second, to what extent will the leadership prioritize economic reform? And third, how will it respond to the effects of globalization, including the penetration of information and market economic practices, or marketization, from the outside world? How a current or future North Korean leadership handles these three issues will shape the options and likely U.S. responses to North Korea, and will in turn influence how the U.S.–DPRK relationship develops in a post-Kim Jong-il regime as it transitions through something like one of three possible paths for North Korean succession.[1]

Challenges to the Third Kim Generation

Despite apparent early 2009 efforts to lay the foundations for a power transition to his third son, Kim Jong-un, a variety of factors not present during Kim Jong-il's own ascension could pose serious, if not fatal, obstacles to a successful political succession process today. These factors include, but are not limited to, diminishing institutional cohesion within North Korea, the reverberating effects of sensitive information and rumors about North Korean politics in the international media, and North Korea's continued dependence on external economic support for its political survival.

First, the North Korean institutional context for managing the succession process is dramatically different today. Following Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, a severe famine challenged Kim Jong-il's own bid for leadership with effects so enduring that they still shape North Korea's internal institutional cohesion. The famine exposed structural failures in the DPRK system, reportedly forcing Kim Jong-il to disavow responsibility for economic policy at its height. The Public Distribution System (PDS), through which average North Koreans received regular food rations, broke down irreversibly and exposed the insufficiency of North Korean self-production efforts in the absence of significant external fertilizer inputs. Rather than relying on an endorsement from the Korean Workers Party to legitimize his succession, as had been the case in other socialist systems, Kim Jong-il established the National Defense Commission and made it the central vehicle to exercise power in the DPRK's revised 1998 constitution, which consolidated his rule. The new leader's *sungun* (military first) policies prioritized military institutions over those of the party and the government. Meanwhile, among the other long-term effects of the famine, the central government's role in providing food was irreversibly broken and replaced by private markets and the monetization of North Korea's public economy.[2] Ceding central government control and developing "self-reliance" at the local level has increased the possibility that longstanding grievances among rival bureaucratic institutions may surface during today's succession process, complicating the political management of such a transition.

Second, information flows between North Korea and the outside world have become more frequent and active in recent years. These flows have become part of a feedback loop likely to be amplified when the succession process begins in earnest, posing a severe challenge to regime cohesion. The fact that North Korea's central government organs felt a need to respond to initial international rumors about Kim Jong-il's health is an indirect confirmation that these were also running rampant inside North Korea, and thus required a response. Likewise, the number of South Korean-based defector organizations providing outlets for nearly real-time news reporting about developments inside North

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Korea continues to grow. This suggests both a greater demand for news about North Korea and a strengthened network and capacity to report it, including reports about actions by North Korea's high-level governing authorities.[3] The availability of external information that might challenge the legitimacy of succession arrangements may make the task of managing a stable transition more difficult.

Third, since 1994, North Korea is increasingly vulnerable to economic leverage from external parties, especially China and South Korea, which may expose the DPRK to greater volatility when it is necessary to ensure a stable succession. The deterioration of inter-Korean relations with the February 2008 inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak administration led Seoul to cease annually providing 500,000 tons of food and fertilizer, a contribution which covered over half of the estimated structural food production deficit North Korea faces each year.[4] Moreover, if China and South Korea, which provide about three-quarters of North Korea's overall trade, simultaneously strictly implemented UN Security Council resolution 1874, the stiff financial sanctions and inspections on North Korea's international trade would surely have a destabilizing effect.[5] Beijing and Seoul could, therefore, prove instrumental both to the success or failure of any succession process and to the new policies of any successor.

These differences since 1994–1998 will likely make today's father-to-son transition more challenging. This does not mean that it is ultimately impossible for North Korea's elites to hang together today, but there is no question that North Korea's institutional resiliency and most effective mechanisms for enforcing political will on the North Korean people have declined since the famine and loss of control by the central government.

Three Imminent Choices for Pyongyang

North Korea's next leader clearly will face these, and other, significant challenges, many of which will be tied up with trying to consolidate the new regime's power. Three early decisions will have implications for North Korea's international relations in general and U.S. relations in particular. First, the attitude of the future leader toward North Korea's nuclear weapons pursuits will influence the scope and direction of North Korea's international profile. Second, prospects for economic reform will have major ramifications for the style of Pyongyang's leadership, the DPRK's prosperity, and economic integration with the outside world. Finally, the new leader will have to respond to the gradual erosion of the DPRK's own capacity

to cope with external challenges to control its internal environment. In each case, North Korea is not omnipotent, and the U.S. response will matter, with implications for the future of U.S.-DPRK relations.

Nuclear Weapons Program

In his book *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*, Jacques Hymans has made an excellent case that the mindset of political leaders has been crucial in shaping national decisions regarding whether or not to acquire nuclear weapons capability.[6] The framework arguably has a bearing on whether or not national leaders might decide to give up nuclear weapons, including a new leader in North Korea. This analysis also has policy implications for how countries might effectively manage a North Korean political transition to enhance the possibility that a new DPRK leadership might be induced to give up its nuclear weapons status.

Hymans' thesis is that national leaders whose world views are shaped by a combination of fear and pride are more likely to pursue nuclear weapons as a means of defending their nations than leaders who do not view the world through those two elements combined. Utilizing content analysis from national policy statements and leadership speeches, Hymans analyzes a series of cases in which countries made nuclear acquisition decisions. The world view of the North Korean leadership contains precisely the mix of fear and pride that Hymans' analysis says leads to the pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. This mix of pride and fear is reflected both in North Korean leadership desires to become a *kangsong taeguk* (a rich and powerful nation) by 2012 and in the fear demonstrated by North Korean apprehensions about its own regime survival[7] as well as its apparent failure over the last two decades in a longstanding competition for legitimacy with South Korea. In Hymans' framework, this leadership type is categorized as "oppositional nationalist," a type that is highly attracted by the pursuit of nuclear weapons.[8]

Utilizing this framework, the question becomes: is it possible to imagine that any successor to Kim Jong-il might either have less extreme pride, or nationalism, or less fear? In other words, be more open to cooperation with the outside world? To put the analysis into Hymans' analytical framework, the question is: what would it take to move North Korea from an "oppositional nationalist" worldview to another worldview less conducive to pursuing nuclear weapons? Given that national pride and fear are two foundational elements utilized inside North Korea to sustain the regime, the prospects for a positive change in the orientation of Kim Jong-il's successor do not appear to be great by themselves. Thus, it is unlikely that a designated successor to Kim Jong-il would be likely to abandon nuclear weapons, which will continue to be perceived as essential to North Korea's survival. A successor to Kim Jong-il, however, might be willing to bet

on the benefits of reform and opening to the outside world in order to enhance economic performance as a primary means to assure survival and internal legitimacy. Such a regime would likely have to abandon the pursuit of nuclear weapons, and thus set the U.S.–DPRK relationship on a new path.

Any competition for succession in North Korea will most likely be focused on the internal factors necessary to consolidate political power. Hymans' framework does, however, imply that it is in the South Korean and U.S. interest to send signals that they are willing to assist any North Korean successor willing to abandon nuclear weapons. Such an approach, however, might be very politically difficult in South Korea—never mind the United States—given that such a policy would preemptively set aside the prospect of an early Korean reunification to empower a successor North Korean regime, even if it was committed to peaceful coexistence.

If a North Korean leader were willing to abandon Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons, the United States has in fact already signaled its willingness to normalize U.S.–DPRK political relations, and would be likely to support international loans and other economic benefits to such a post-Kim Jong-il leadership. Such a goal should be reiterated publicly early on and often during the succession process as a way to induce potential North Korean successors to consider a nonnuclear path to enhance internal political legitimacy and the prospects for regime survival. Another factor influencing U.S. policy would be the degree of commitment by a North Korean successor to promoting a stable inter-Korean relationship. Even if North Korea were to abandon nuclear weapons, the United States would still want to see major improvements in inter-Korean relations as a symbol of Pyongyang's commitment to peaceful coexistence.

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Prospects for Economic Reform

In his book, *North Korea After Kim Jong-il*, analyst Marcus Noland examines three economic policy options to either radically or gradually integrate North Korea with the rest of the world.[9] The first path, cooperative engagement, sketches easing diplomatic tensions leading to an increase in foreign aid, North Korea's membership in multilateral development agencies, and economic liberalization. This scenario is a useful benchmark to consider what North Korea's successor leadership might gain by pursing economic integration with its neighbors.

Noland projects that a DPRK leadership pursuing this path might receive total aid in the amount of $3 billion per year, economic benefits from normalization with Japan (expected to be at least $10 billion based on the precedent set by the

Republic of Korea [ROK]-Japan normalization in the mid-1960s), an increase in external trade to 71 percent of national income, and a 6 percent annual economic growth rate. Noland concluded that such a path, if undertaken prior to any North Korean leadership succession process, would virtually ensure a stable family succession. In this case, the point is that a successor leadership with a commitment to economic reform may have a good chance of successfully securing legitimacy.

Assuming that North Korea has not embarked on such a path prior to succession, three primary challenges would confront a successor who recognized its potential benefits. First, how to manage an economic opening to benefit the successor's own legitimacy rather than engendering competition or creating rival power centers? Second, how to defeat opposition from saboteurs threatened by the shift in sources of power and legitimacy that such an opening might entail? And third, how to continue to justify North Korea's *raison d'etre* in the face of the reforms and more successful South Korean development example?

The United States would clearly welcome Pyongyang's pursuit of such a path, in part because it would require settling North Korea's nuclear program. As long as the nuclear issue is under control, it is possible to imagine that the United States would actively promote North Korea's economic rehabilitation, although South Korea would presumably be the principal actor in such an endeavor. Nonetheless, given that the United States has provided humanitarian aid to North Korea even during more difficult periods in U.S.–DPRK relations, it is possible to imagine that the United States might generously support North Korean economic reforms if a new DPRK leadership genuinely decided to pursue such a path.

Internal Effects of Globalization

A less obvious, but perhaps more pressing, challenge for a post-Kim Jong-il leadership is how it manages the internal effects of globalization, particularly the dissemination of information and development of markets inside North Korea. These two developments may constitute the most severe threats to the political control of the DPRK leadership as it attempts to manage an orderly succession process. The responding policies of any North Korean leadership are likely to have ramifications for human rights conditions inside the DPRK and subsequent U.S. policy, potentially inhibiting U.S. efforts to support or promote the new leadership's reforms.

Professor Hazel Smith, based in part on her experience in North Korea with the UN World Food Program, has described the effects of marketization, monetization, and decentralization on aspects of North Korean daily life following the famine of the mid-1990s.[10] Markets have replaced the government as the primary factor influencing everyday life in North Korea, regardless of the policies of the central government in North Korea, demonstrating the impact of "bottom-up" reforms. Instead of relying on

government rations for food, individuals must find the resources to purchase it in the marketplace. A similar breakdown in control of information about the outside world is occurring through the dissemination of CDs, DVDs, and other cultural products now accessible to average North Koreans for the first time. These structural breakdowns suggest that the political control of the DPRK government will erode further and are likely to pose particular challenges for a political transition. Any post-Kim Jong-il leadership will likely need to take measures to reconsolidate power and ensure political loyalty at all levels of society. To the extent that political oppression through prison camps remains an instrument of political control, or even increases, U.S. political support to improve bilateral relations will then decline.

Scenarios for the Succession

These big choices facing a North Korean successor leadership will have significant implications for U.S.–DPRK relations. If a post-Kim Jong-il leadership chooses to abandon nuclear weapons and accept a measure of internal liberalization, while still being able to maintain political support and avoid repressive tactics, there is a positive future for U.S.–DPRK relations. The likelihood, however, that such a leadership will take the reins of power following Kim Jong-il remains relatively low, particularly because of the three challenges highlighted earlier exacerbating instability in the impending transition. For this reason, it is also useful to consider various other, less rosy, succession scenarios and possible U.S. reactions to each.

Scenario One: Managed Succession

In the spring of 2009, it became widely known that efforts were underway in Pyongyang to institutionalize new succession arrangements by holding an SPA meeting in April, strengthening the National Defense Commission, and possibly designing new constitutional arrangements. All of these activities suggest that Kim Jong-il grasped the urgency of his health situation and was strengthening institutional arrangements to stabilize a political transition. These arrangements not only reduced the likelihood of reform but also made the leadership even more conservative and inward-focused.

If North Korea successfully manages a succession to either one of Kim Jong-il's sons or a collective leadership bound by fear, there is a greater likelihood of continuity and less of a prospect for change in the U.S.–DPRK relationship. Such a leadership would continue to focus on consolidating internal political control and on utilizing nuclear weapons pursuits to extract economic benefits from the international community. Although the United States would likely continue to mobilize regional efforts to pressure the North Korean leadership to give up its nuclear program and embark on reform, the fundamental differences

between a successor conservative nationalist DPRK leadership and the United States would be likely to persist.

Scenario Two: Contested Succession

A contested succession scenario would see various factions competing for leadership, with civil war-type conditions even possible, posing the greatest challenge for North Korea's neighbors. The basis for this scenario lies in the likelihood that deep institutional and interpersonal rivalries previously masked by Kim Jong-il's authoritarian rule might emerge as part of an all-out competition for political power. Competing factions might seek support from external actors including China, South Korea, and the United States. Eventually, a new political leadership would likely emerge, but that new leadership's legitimacy would not be tied to Kim Jong-il, opening the possibility for radical changes in North Korea's policy and orientation toward the outside world. Under these conditions, the possibility of economic reform and opening might be greater. But there is also a possibility that a nationalist leadership might emerge, driving a further inward turn and even less interest in cooperation with the international community.

> Two developments constitute the most severe threats to the DPRK leadership's political control.

The contested succession scenario poses the greatest possibility that external powers might be drawn into possible conflict if North Korea's neighbors perceive various factions as distinctly favorable to their own interests. Generally speaking however, the various parties, including the United States, are more likely to implement measures to contain the spillover effects of instability, but not to undertake proactive measures to interfere or impose order in North Korea. Protracted instability and direct effects spilling over into South Korea and China's northeastern border region, however, might induce external intervention to restore order.

The danger lies in the possibility that a civil conflict within North Korea might become a proxy conflict, with rival factions backed by different external actors. Or, a successor leadership not tied to Kim Jong-il might become the object of competition for influence from outside actors. In such a situation, it is unlikely that the United States would pursue influence in North Korea directly. Instead, U.S. policies and positions vis-à-vis a successor regime would probably be influenced by South Korean policies toward the new leadership. It is also possible to imagine that a successor North Korean leadership might attempt to

reach out and draw in the United States as a counterweight to respective Chinese and/or South Korean efforts to influence the new regime.

Scenario Three: Failed Succession

A failed succession scenario essentially envisages the breakdown of North Korean state authority without a clear successor capable of reimposing political order. If North Korea were to become a failed state, there is a strong presumption that South Korea is the natural candidate to take over, impose political order, and reestablish stability and political authority in the North, effectively achieving Korean reunification in the process.

Practically, however, the challenges of dealing with a failed state are immense and likely to overwhelm the capacities of any single state to manage. A North Korean scenario would be akin to other failed state situations, which have normally required extensive international commitments under the UN with assistance from many other members of the international community. The United States would almost certainly provide some measure of humanitarian or other support, preferably in ways that would support South Korean capacities to impose political order and achieve political reunification. Such U.S. political support would be likely, as long as South Korean efforts are deemed feasible and likely to succeed, even if the level of U.S. financial contribution is likely to be limited given the state of the economy.

Although Korean reunification sounds like a desirable political end-state, the accompanying challenges for Seoul would be immense. In this context, the U.S.–ROK alliance may well become more important to South Korea to provide the security necessary to ensure that neighbors do not take political advantage while South Korea is consumed with these tasks. One geostrategic challenge is the fact that a divided Korea has actually reduced security competition in Northeast Asia in recent decades, given that the diplomatic orientation and friendliness of the Korean peninsula is a vital security concern for both China and Japan. Thus, there would be a critical need to establish regional arrangements assuring both China and Japan that a unified Korea would not be hostile to their respective security interests. Deputy U.S. Secretary of State James Steinberg's recent reference to the need for such arrangements as part of the broader U.S. vision for how to assure security and stability in Northeast Asia is an indication that the United States recognizes the need for new mechanisms for strengthening stability in the region.[11]

Will Things Change?

Examining these prospects for U.S.–DPRK relations in a post-Kim Jong-il era underscores the importance and likely influence of South Korean policy positions as a mediating influence on U.S. policy toward North Korea, except

possibly for the nuclear issue and some concerns about human rights.[12] Once the nuclear issue has been resolved, the United States is likely to be open to encourage North Korean economic reforms, but is unlikely to take the lead on many technical issues related to North Korea's economic and political development. Aside from the nuclear issue, the United States is likely to play a supporting role to South Korea in support of peaceful coexistence and inter-Korean integration.

The U.S. should position itself now to send a clear signal to any prospective DPRK leadership.

Any change in the North Korean leadership after Kim Jong-il may represent an opportunity to transform U.S.–DPRK relations, especially if a successor leadership is willing to forego nuclear weapons development and move along the path of economic reform. In fact, the United States arguably should position itself now to send a clear signal to any prospective North Korean leadership that the opportunities and benefits associated with reform and giving up its nuclear weapons programs are real. Although such successions are historically resolved solely on the basis of internal power considerations, such a U.S. posture might tempt North Korean successors to consider that external economic and political benefits might lay a new foundation for its legitimacy. The increased likelihood of the managed succession scenario, however, suggests that the most likely current path will not change U.S.–DPRK relations.

Notes

1. These three scenarios are sketched in Paul Stares and Joel Wit, "Preparing for Sudden Change in North Korea," *Council Special Report*, no. 42 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, January 2009).
2. See Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace: International Security, Humanitarian Assistance, and Social Change in North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2005); Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
3. For example, to the U.S. funded South Korean services of Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, a newly-established South Korea-based radio station targeting North Korea is Open Radio for North Korea. In addition, the Japan-based *Rimjingang* magazine has featured reporting from within North Korea by North Korean journalists since 2008 and a newly published Korean-language journal has been organized as a venue for discussion among North Korean refugees with elite backgrounds. In the course of covering North Korea's food situation, the South Korean nongovernmental organization, Good Friends, publishes a regular newsletter that features stories of local-level conditions faced by average North Koreans.

4. See Scott Snyder, "Changes in Seoul's North Korean Policy and Implications for Pyongyang's Inter-Korean Diplomacy" (paper, British Columbia, Canada, June 25–26, 2009) (presented at University of British Columbia conference on North Korea "Emerging Issues of North Korean Foreign Policy").
5. See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "What To Do About North Korea: Will Sanctions Work?" *The Oriental Economist* 77, no. 7 (July 2009): 11–12, http://www.orientaleconomist.com/documents/haggard_noland_nkorea.pdf.
6. See Jacques Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
7. Statement by H.E. Pak Kil Yon, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the Delegation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, UN General Assembly, New York, September 28, 2009, http://www.un.org/ga/64/generaldebate/pdf/KP_en.pdf (press release).
8. The other categories are "sportsmanlike nationalist" (open to cooperation, but still prideful), "sportsmanlike subaltern" (open to cooperation, not prideful), and "oppositional subaltern" (not open to cooperation, but not prideful or nationalistic).
9. See Marcus Noland, *North Korea After Kim Jong-il* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, January 2004).
10. Smith, *Hungry for Peace*, pp. 77–100.
11. James B. Steinberg, "Engaging Asia 2009: Strategies for Success," (speech, National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington, D.C., April 1, 2009), http://www.state.gov/s/d/2009/121564.htm. Steinberg's comments reflect a broad U.S. aspiration and do not address possible U.S. policy directions in the event of a contingency on the Korean peninsula.
12. For a detailed and comprehensive review of the challenges the United States and South Korea will face in managing a contested and/or failed succession process, see See-Won Byun, *North Korea Contingency Planning and U.S.–ROK Cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: The Asia Foundation, September 2009), http://www.asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DPRKContingencyCUSKP0908.pdf.