

The North Korean Regime Succession Process and its Implications for Regional Security

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Maintaining power, and perhaps in Kim Chong-il's mind, maintaining power in the hands of his family members after his death, is a continuing challenge for the regime in Pyongyang. As Kim ages this has become a priority. Thus, this paper will examine the events in the Post-9/11 era dealing with succession issues, and the possible instability in Pyongyang that surrounds these issues.

Kim has a vested interest in ensuring he can successfully hand over the regime to his hand-picked successor, as the evidence suggests he has made carrying on his father's legacy a high priority. A smooth transition to Kim's successor is not just important to whoever the power goes to, but also to the stability of North Korea – and to the stability of Northeast Asia. If Kim fails to successfully implement a successor process, this will likely lead to instability that will have a negative impact, not only on North Korea, but on every nation-state in the region – militarily, economically, and politically. Most importantly, consequences of a North Korean failed state would quite literally rewrite the security strategies of every state in the region. This is not to say that the continued existence of the Kim Regime is a stabilizing factor, because there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. But the succession system – its success or failure – is one datum point which we can observe for the purpose of predicting changes in North Korean stability.

Unusual issues relating to the stability of the Kim Chong-il regime first started to surface during the fall of 2004. These events (which continue as of 2006) may show some disturbing trends in the ongoing stability of the Kim regime in North Korea.¹

During early November of 2004, unusual reports began to filter out of North Korea that

portraits of Kim Chong-il had been removed from honored spots.² During the same time frame, the press in Japan and South Korea reported that North Korea's official media had at least temporarily dropped the glorifying title of "Dear Leader" when referring to Kim Chong-il.³ Also during the fall of 2004, reports began to surface from China that several generals and high-ranking government officials were defecting, while others had already defected. Up to 130 generals reportedly defected, and an unknown number of government officials. According to Zhao Huji, one of China's leading North Korean experts and a researcher at the Communist Party School, "...unlike most defectors crossing into China, the high-level defectors and their families did not lack basic necessities. Rather, they were disconcerted with Kim Chong-il's rule."⁴

A North Korean Foreign Ministry official denied the press reports that Kim Chong-il's pictures had been removed from public offices and schools, citing the reports as "groundless fabrication."⁵ A North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman also denied the reports that hundreds of the country's generals had defected to China, stating, "Never mind the generals, not even a single button of their uniforms has crossed the border."⁶ It is interesting to note, that not long after these events were reported, the "top brass" of the North Korean military pledged their support to Kim Chong-il publicly at an event in Pyongyang.⁷ These reports cropped up rather suddenly, and to date have not been confirmed, though the confusion and surrounding North Korea during the fall of 2004 appears to have possibly been over purges that Kim was in the process of carrying out. The purges – and the secrecy surrounding them – will be discussed next.

During the same time period when the events described above were taking place, several issues arose in the power circle that surrounds Kim Chong-il. Chang Sung-taek,

Kim's brother-in-law, one of his most trusted confidants, and a highly placed official within the North Korean government, was reportedly purged sometime during 2004 – perhaps because of succession issues in the government over which he and the “Dear Leader” disagreed.⁸ During 2004, Kim also reportedly purged several of his relatives and up to 80 other officials and their families (reportedly for trying to “seize power,” but perhaps over succession issues, as with Chang). In an even more intriguing turn of events, Chang's wife (Kim's sister), Kim Kyong-hee was reportedly injured in an auto accident during 2004 – in an event that is assumed to have been a possible attempt on her life.⁹ Kim Kyong-hee may have been in deep depression, and is reported to have undergone medical treatment for alcohol in France, possibly during the same time period.¹⁰ Finally, Kim's eldest son Kim Chong-nam (who's nickname is the “fat bear”) reportedly narrowly avoided an assassination attempt while on a trip to Austria. There has also been speculation that this was because of infighting within the inner circle over succession and power issues involving who will wield the reigns of power once Kim Chong-il is gone.¹¹

During 2005, rumors began to circulate that Kim had picked his second son, Kim Jong-chol as his successor. Kim Jong-chol has reportedly been put in charge of a department within the Korean Workers Party that will “groom” him for the leadership of North Korea.¹² Other signs that he may be the elder Kim's successor include that fact that he dined with his father and visiting Chinese leader Hu Jintao during October of 2005, and reports that his portrait is being hung at the Central Committee building in Pyongyang. There have been no pictures released to the west of Kim Jong-chol since he was a teenager attending school in Switzerland, and it appears that he holds many of the

reclusive habits of his father.¹³ Despite signs that Kim's second son may be the "heir apparent," there are confusing rumors that may indicate this is a false alarm. According to Lee Kyo-duk, of the Korean Institute for National Unification, the 25-year-old may have a "fatal disease" that results in his suffering from excessive female hormones. Kim Chong-il's former Japanese chef, wrote in his memoirs that the elder Kim considered his second son "too girly" to transfer his power to.¹⁴ Nevertheless, anecdotal indications continue to suggest that Kim's second son is the "heir apparent." According to South Korean reports, some North Korean officials were seen wearing lapel pins bearing the image of Kim's second son during the spring of 2006 – another possible indicator that he is the "heir apparent."¹⁵

The oldest son of the family, Kim Chong-nam, (the previously mentioned "fat bear") would ordinarily be considered the heir apparent in a Confucianist society, but he is widely known for his drunken binges in Pyongyang hotels, and for blowing wads of cash on shopping trips to China – as well as trying to sneak into Japan on a fake passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland.¹⁶ Little is known regarding the status of Kim Chong-un, the youngest of the three sons – though according to a recent Japanese press report, badges of Kim Chong-il's third son have been circulating among senior Workers Party of Korea cadres, military officers, and vice ministerial class officials of the government since mid-February (thus adding to the confusion regarding who Kim will choose as his anointed successor).¹⁷ The situation surrounding the "Family Kim" thus remains confusing, as are the questions regarding who is most powerful in Kim's circle.

During January of 2006, Brent Choi, a North Korea specialist with the JoongAng Ilbo, wrote that, "...most of the reports on North Korea's successor are 99% wrong. Kim

Chong-il's sons might not even make it to the list of candidates. In order to become a successor the prospective leader will have to prove himself in enhancing both economy and ideology.”¹⁸ This conjecture was further supported later in 2006 when the German press quoted a University of Vienna professor as saying a junta could replace Kim instead of one of his sons, and that Kim does not necessarily need to stay alive to remain ruler.¹⁹ While both of the examples discussed above are purely educated guesses by experts on North Korean internal politics, they do highlight the mystery surrounding Kim Chong-il's succession plan. The confusing picture surrounding Kim's power circle became all the more mysterious during January of 2006, when Chang Sung-taek was “un-purged.”²⁰ While there is a great deal of debate surrounding why this occurred, it may have something to do with succession issues – particularly if Chang has anything to do with helping Kim to pick who his successor will be. In any case, any discussion of the “succession issue” is taboo in North Korea, as is any discussion of Kim's sons, their names, ages, and whereabouts.²¹

The prospect of a leader succeeding Kim Chong-il who is not one of his sons obviously rates some discussion. While this is certainly an interesting prospect to consider, there are many factors that come into play here. First of all, if one is to follow historical examples of how succession has occurred in North Korea (the only example we have is obviously the Kim succession), a grooming process would have to begin several years before the new leader would actually emerge. The Kim succession in 1994 is important as a case study because most analysts considered it a *fait accompli* that Kim Chong-il would succeed his father in 1994. There is no such evidence – at least not yet – that any such individual exists today that everyone would consider the heir apparent.

More to the point, Kim has not “anointed” any of his military officers or one of his other relatives as the person who might succeed him yet.

Based on the evidence discussed above, it appears that should there be no clear successor to Kim Chong-il when he dies, several scenarios are possible. The first is that there is a violent struggle for power among those in the current power circle in North Korea. Each side would seek to gain the support of the military, as this would appear to be the power base most important to maintaining power in the country. In this case, it would be anyone’s guess as to who would emerge as the leader of the country. Another scenario would be that the military itself would seize power. In this case, there is again, no clear indication as to what individual or group of individuals would seek to gain dominance in the government. The absolute power that Kim currently wields, and the Byzantine web of reporting, counter-reporting, and resultant fear makes it extremely difficult for “factions” to form within the military – at least that are apparent to those analyzing contemporary North Korean issues.

Still another scenario would be that members of the military would seize power following Kim’s death and then sue for peace and unification with the South. This scenario is not as far fetched as it may seem. It is a rather well known “secret” that many of the generals in North Korea are rather corrupt, and there are even rumors that many of them are actually on the payroll of the NIS or other agencies. This may be a scenario where the ball will truly be in Seoul’s court. Should the South Korean government choose to aggressively pursue unification and dialogue during what would likely be a confusing and important time frame, it may be a chance to actually bring an end to the tyranny that has existed in the North since the end of WWII. Finally, a scenario that has

real potential for occurring is that no leadership figure would emerge, the army becomes factionalized, and the country falls into civil war. Again, this may be an opportunity for the government in Seoul, as this would be a significant opportunity (depending on the circumstances) for the ROK to step in and take control of the North – perhaps with minimal use of force.

One thing is for sure, there is no clear evidence that any potential future leader has emerged yet who can step into Kim's shoes should he die. Furthermore, based on the length of time it took Kim Il-song to prepare the way for Kim Chong-il, we should expect that it would take considerable time to adequately prepare the way for the next successor. Thus, it appears fairly obvious that should something happen to him in the near future, the potential for widespread anarchy in North Korea is very real. This leads to the assessment that Kim is likely extremely concerned about the current situation, and is thus in the process of addressing this issue in order to assure (as much as possible) a smooth succession process. There is no reason to believe that Kim does not want the legacy of himself and his father to continue. In fact, the evidence suggests that he places this as an important priority.²²

The rather confusing evidence presented above points to three key challenges and issues for the Kim Chong-il regime regarding succession. First, it will be necessary to prevent political turbulence within the regime caused by division of loyalty between Kim Chong-il and his successor – whoever that successor turns out to be, and whenever he is formally announced (if ever). Secondly, the goal is to ensure that the propaganda and political mythology process adequately indoctrinates the North Korean populace. Finally, it is of the utmost importance to ensure that competition between Kim family

members does not impact regime security (it may have been this competition that was at least partially responsible for Chang's two-year purge). Kim will continue to be concerned with these issues as long as he remains in power.

In order to prevent turbulence within the regime caused by a division between Kim Chong-il and his successor – whoever that may be – Kim will have to continue to engage in purges as these divisions occur, or he perceives that they are beginning to occur. Kim has already shown that he will not hesitate to engage in such purges as he has already conducted them on several occasions during the mid-1990s and again during 2004. This is probably the only way that he can attempt to ensure traditional Confucian loyalties that tend to rise up in Korean society do not dominate his power circle. The indoctrination and political mythology process has not yet begun and this is important. The process must begin soon in order to ensure a fluid and smooth transition to power following Kim's death. Of course the competition between Kim family members, if left unchecked, can and will threaten the regime security of the DPRK – particularly if members of the military become involved. This may have happened already, though the evidence is sketchy at best. Nevertheless, Kim is likely to take whatever measures he deems necessary to ensure that a lid is kept on any open competition for power among his family members and their allies.

Based on the evidence presented in this paper, one would think the succession issue in North Korea is still up in the air. While there is anecdotal evidence that suggests Kim may already be planning to choose and more importantly “anoint” his successor, many issues remain up in the air. Despite his best efforts, in my view there is still no clear base of support or loyalty for Kim's successor. Thus, the potential for several scenarios in the

case of his death still exists. It is of great importance to consider the implications for the region should the succession process lead to violence that escalates into an implosion within North Korea, or worse, escalating violence that spills across its borders.

Should Kim's death occur before a clear successor has been anointed and is clearly set in the minds of the army, the party, and the people, the clear possibility exists that a vicious fight for power will ensue. This is because of the current situation that exists today, where everybody is compelled to compete with everybody else for power with few natural allies. Thus, if Kim's death occurs with no clear and credible successor in the wings, what could easily ensue would be a no-holds barred grab for power between the military, the party, and the security agencies. If so, there is no way to predict the potentiality for implosion or explosion – or both.

For China (and their current autocratic leadership in the Politburo), a continuation of the North Korean state is considered vital for their national security interests. China's current leadership likely feels that they cannot afford an unstable or collapsed North Korea on their border. Of utmost importance to Beijing, a collapsed North Korea might lead to early re-unification, and this would remove the current strategic and operational depth from the Americans that currently exists.²³ Russia also has no interest in seeing North Korea collapse.²⁴ This would remove the last vestiges of influence that Moscow has in Northeast Asia, and make their presence almost irrelevant.

Other nations in the region would also be troubled by a violent or unstable succession process in North Korea. South Korea's government simply cannot afford a collapsed North Korea, as the prospect of rebuilding it has the potential to be devastating economically.²⁵ Indeed, in an alternative scenario where semi-anarchy or complete

anarchy were to occur, Seoul would be very concerned with an exploding or imploding North Korea whose instability would be likely to seep across the border. In short, Seoul is simply not yet ready for North Korean state failure. Japan would be faced with two very unsavory implications, an exploding North Korea, or eventually, a unified Korea that has the potential to be a major economic and military challenge years down the road after recovery from the debilitating effects of sudden unification. When it comes to the United States, there can be no doubt that the biggest concern is control of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction. There are no benign scenarios in an imploding country with a million man army, and nuclear weapons and missiles, whose control are unknown. Given the ramifications discussed above, the successor process in North Korea will continue to be an important issue as long as the current regime exists in North Korea – for all of those with strategic interests in the region.

Notes

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