

North Korea in the Kim Jung-un Era, Where to Go?

Written by Ryan Shin

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RYAN SHIN, DEC 30 2011

The North Korean 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong-il unexpectedly passed away on 17th December. Now, Kim Jong-un, who represents the third generation of the 'Kim Dynasty' after Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, has come under the political spotlight. The new North Korean leader is in his late 20s and has been so unknown to the outside world that a torrent of predictions on the future of North Korea is being suggested.

The problem is that these predictions are rarely based on an analysis of the words and messages coming from North Korea. North Korea is far from a capitalist and open society, the systems which most observers of North Korea are familiar with. If North Korea is viewed from the perspective of Western countries, it is inevitably seen as an irrational and somewhat grotesque country because it has been established through substantially different historical and ideological backgrounds to theirs. However, North Korea's actions seem to be based on a particular logic and this logic has often been expressed by its own political language. It is the reason why this article focuses on the "Notice to All Party Members, Servicepersons and People (19th December)," the first North Korean official statement on the death of Kim Jong-il.[1] Although the statement might not be a perfect reference to fully understand the Kim Jung-un era, at least it can be seen as a starting point for prospecting short and mid-term political situations around the Korean Peninsula.

Kim Jung-un, Stable or Not?

The official title of Kim Jung-un is Vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). He is not a member of the National Defense Commission, which Kim Jong-il chaired and now his uncle-in-law, Chang Sung-taek, is vice chairman of the commission.[2] In this respect, it is difficult to say that Kim Jung-un is by now a No.1 power from the perspective of hierarchy. This is the reason why some North Korean watchers speculate that his uncle or other powerful generals may share power with the young third Kim in a familiar fashion to the situation which emerged in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin.

However, the third Kim is qualitatively different from other North Korean military generals and political elites. According to the statement, Kim Jung-un, the 'great successor,' is a divine figure who was born with the revolutionary traditions of 'Mt. Paektu' along with his grand-father and father. Furthermore, the statement proclaims that "Kim Jung-un's leadership provides a sure guarantee for creditably carrying to completion the revolutionary cause of *Juche*, started by Kim Il-sung and led by Kim Jong-il to victory." (The Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, 2011). In fact, a commentary of *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the WPK confirmed that Kim Jong-un is the new leader of North Korea calling him 'Our Supreme Commander' on 24th December.[3] All these North Korean sources confirm that Kim Jung-un is a supra-hierarchical figure in North Korea.

Except for the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), the history of North Korea is linked to the 600 year-long *Chosun* Dynasty. In other words, it is highly probable that the North Korean mentality would block challenging the legitimacy based on Kim Il-sung's bloodline. This is the reason why the WPK and military factions are expected to rally around Kim Jung-un in order to stabilize the current situation, in the short-term at least. However, there remain factors which may weaken Kim Jung-un's grip on power with respect to this 'Kim bloodline.'

There are also other members of the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il families. Accordingly, although this scenario is

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hypothetical at the moment, it is a logical prospect that if Kim Jong-un fails to consolidate his power base, discontent factions of the North Korean military and party elites may feel the necessity to find an alternative legitimate person who has same blood as Kim Jong-il.

North Korean Nuclear Programs, Go or Stop?

Even during the period of mourning for the Kim Jong-il, on 19th December, North Korea contacted the US and discussed the suspension of its uranium enrich program in exchange for food-aid packages from the US. Due to the fact that North Korea seems to be continuing talks with the US, some observers are taking the view that North Korea in the Kim Jung-un era may take steps towards denuclearization in order to deal with its aggravating economic difficulties. The statement on the Kim Jong-il's death suggests something for these observers to think about.

The statement says that Kim Jong-il made North Korea emerge as a nuclear weapons state and an invincible military power which no enemy can ever provoke (The Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, 2011). Furthermore, it proclaims that "under the uplifted banner of *Sun-gun* (military-first), we should increase the country's military capability in every way to reliably safeguard the Korean socialist system." These phrases demonstrate North Korea's strong will to continue a pro-military policy, the trademark of its second leader Kim Jung-il. In this respect, Kim Jung-un and his people will not easily give up nuclear programs unless or even if the US, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and other countries provide a clear 'safeguard' to the North. North Korea seems to have the sense of chronic crisis that its regime may be collapsing due to domestic difficulties as well as pressures from other countries such as the US. In this respect, the statement clearly announced that the alleged nuclear weapon state status and the *Sun-gun* policy are and will be the main strategies to sustain North Korea as they are the credentials and teachings left by Kim Jong-il.[4]

Inter-Korean Relations, Where to Go?

The *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong* incidents[5], the two North Korean military provocations in the West Sea in 2010 against the ROK, aggravated inter-Korean relations to a substantial degree. Furthermore, proclaiming that it would no longer talk to the 'traitor group' of Lee Myung-bak regarding Seoul's offer to hold an inter-Korean summit last year, Pyongyang cut almost all the regular communication channels between the two Koreas. However, North Korea implies that it might be possible to resume talks with a government of the ROK which it prefers. The statement says that North Korea would implement the South-North Joint Declaration, which was announced and reconfirmed at the two Inter-Korean summits in 2000 and 2007. The current ROK government seems to be taking a cautious approach in order not to provoke North Korea. It allowed the visit of the families of late President Kim Dae-jung and *Hyundai* Group to the North to pay respects to Kim Jong-il.

Meanwhile, Lee Myung-bak's government has announced that in order to resume inter-Korean relations in earnest, North Korea needs to express more than regret, such as an apology, over the *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong* attacks which killed a total of 50 innocent South Koreans. However, North Korea has been strongly opposed to doing this and even has claimed the incidents took place due to the ROK. Considering the seriousness of the political shockwaves which the two incidents carried, it seems hard to argue that the two Koreas will officially give up their existing positions on the incidents. The current situation needs to be politically imagined from the perspective of the two Koreas if either of them hopes to improve the strained inter-Korean relations.

Preview: Future Situations over the Korean Peninsula

Considering North Korea's current positions, which were demonstrated by the statement on the death of Kim Jong-il, how will political situations over the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia unfold? Here are some points to think about:

1. Nature of Power, North Korean Provocations

Although the political system of North Korea is so different from that of other democratic countries, the nature of

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political power seems to be similar to some degree. That is, a change of leader always comes with a change of people in the important posts. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il also continued the purge of potential competitors and oppositions when they took power. In a strict sense, most of the high ranking officials of the party and military factions were Kim Jong-il's subordinates who were appointed not by Kim Jong-un but by his father. In this respect, Kim Jong-un, the sole successor to Kim Jong-il, has motives to reshuffle major and political posts in order to plant his own people in those posts. If the new Kim makes up his mind to do so, the change is likely to take place in a shocking way, as he is so young and his political background is so different from those of the current high-ranking officials.

This scenario will accompany domestic instability as there will be a wide 'power-shift' within North Korea's elites group. At this point, North Korea is likely to intentionally create military provocations such as launching missiles, attacking the ROK in a limited range and kicking out the negotiation table as it has often done in the past. It is because a crisis in relationship with other countries is a good situation in which North Korea can mobilize the logic that North Korean people should be rally behind the comrade of their leader, as the 'US imperialists' and 'South Korean puppets' always try to squeeze and collapse North Korea regime.[6] In particular, North Korea has long proclaimed that 2012 will be the first year of building a 'strong and prosperous' state. It is another reason why Kim Jong-un and his people may create provocations to show off its military capabilities such as missile and nuclear tests, if necessary.

2. Same and Different, Washington and Beijing

Now, the US and China are talking about peace and stability over the Korean Peninsula. However, their nuances are subtly different. The US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, did not express condolences to the Pyongyang government but to North Korean people.[7] Furthermore, Clinton underlined that new leadership of North Korea needed to honor its commitments while saying that the US had interest in a peaceful and stable transition in North Korea. For a while, on 19th December, China expressed its support to the North Korean regime in a more direct manner.[8] Sending deep condolences over Kim Jong-il's passing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said "China and North Korea will work together to consolidate and develop the traditional friendship between the two parties."

What does this difference mean? As China has continued to announce its opposition to North Korea's nuclear programs, the US and China will cooperate if the Six-Party Talks, the multilateral security forum for resolving North Korean nuclear problem and constructing a peaceful political order in Northeast Asia, progress well. On the other hand, if North Korea sticks to improving its nuclear capabilities and creating provocations, stories can go a different way. The interests of the US and China may conflict with each other. The exposed Sino-US confrontations over the handling process of the *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong* incidents, such as the ROK-US joint military exercises in West Sea, demonstrate well that this scenario can come true. Although China sent its strong opposition to North Korea's nuclear test through supporting UN Security Council Resolution (1718) in 2006, China seems to take precedence in maintaining stability and status quo on the Korean Peninsula over other consideration.[9] China's state-run *Global Times* also claims "China should be resolute in maintaining the independence of North Korea, protect the country's transition of power from external interference, and ensure its freedom to choose its own path." [10] In this respect, China may possibly not to take a hard-line stance towards North Korea even if North Korea does not cooperate with the US in an active manner regarding its denuclearization process unless North Korea does not take provocative actions which shake stability in Northeast Asia.

3. The ROK and the Year 2012

Against this backdrop, the short-term goal of the ROK is taking initiatives regarding the current situation over the Korean Peninsula and the long-term one is the ROK-led unification. The earlier-than-expected power transition of the third generation Kim poses questions regarding what strategies the ROK has to seek in order to achieve its goals. If Kim Jong-un successfully stabilizes North Korea and tries to improve its economic situation, the ROK needs to induce North Korea towards the road of reform and openness in a much more active manner. However, if Kim Jong-un takes hawkish stances against the ROK, voices asking for a much stricter North Korean policy will arise.

Where will the third generation North Korea go? In order to find a more exact answer to this difficult but important

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question, observers of North Korea need to pay attention to the 2012 New Year Joint Editorial of North Korea, which will be released in early January. Every year in the past, North Korea used the editorial to suggest its domestic and foreign policy agendas. In particular, the year 2012 is the first year after the death of Kim Jong-il. Furthermore, North Korea has long proclaimed 2012 will be the first year to transform North Korea into a 'Strong and Prosperous Nation'. In this respect, the 2012 Editorial is expected to convey some remarkable messages which North Korea aims to send to other countries. These are the reasons why in order to understand and prospect the Kim Jung-un era, next year's editorial needs to get more attention.

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[1] The Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea et al, "Notice to All Party Members, Servicepersons and People", 19th December 2011. <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2011/201112/news19/20111219-04ee.html>.

[2] After the death of Kim Il-sung, North Korea revised its constitution and abolished the post of president (*joo-seok*), who took charge of all the national authorities. Furthermore, it is unclear how high ruling organs such as the Supreme People's Assembly, KPW, the Military and National Defense Commission balance and check each other. In fact, Kim Jong-il held multiple titles such as 1) General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, 2) Chairman of the National Defense Commission of the DPRK and 3) Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army. Furthermore, North Korea revised its constitution once again in 2009 and the article 100 of the constitution states "the Chairman of National Defense Commission is the highest leader of North Korea."

[3] The BBC, "North Korea: Kim Jong-un hailed 'Supreme Commander'", 24th December 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16325390>.

[4] However and from an offensive perspective, North Korea is able to use Sun-gun policy as a policy option to threaten other countries as the *Cheonan* and *Yeonpyeong* incidents demonstrate.

[5] The *Cheonan* incident: the sinking of the ROK navy ship *Cheonan* due to North Korean torpedo attack near *Baengryung* island of the ROK on 26th March 2010/ The *Yeonpyeong* incident: the Korean barrages on the South Korean island *Yeonpyeong* in the West Sea on 23rd November 2010.

[6] Multiple North Korean publications suggest this logic which claims that the reason why the North Korean people should pledge allegiance to the 'Dear Leader' and his military is because they are the only ones who are only able to secure North Korea from strong imperialists. In other words, external crises have been intentionally raised in order to legitimize the leadership in some respects.

[7] Clinton, "The Passing of National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il", 19th December 2011, <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/12/20111220100015su0.2711865.html>.

[8] The Chinese Foreign Ministry, "Spokesperson's Remark", 19th December 2011.

[9] Bonnie Glaser and others, "Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula: Impediment on the US-South Korea-China Coordination", Centre for Strategic International Studies, May 2010, 2-4.

[10] The Global Times, "China must ensure smooth NK transition", 22nd December 2011. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/689083/China-must-ensure-smooth-NK-transition.aspx>.