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North Korea and Instability in Northeast Asia

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Among the factors influencing the outlook for long-term stability in Northeast Asia, North Korea's future is arguably the most decisive. The DPRK has been the region's conspicuous strategic outlier for decades. Internationally isolated, profoundly alienated from its far more successful neighbors in South Korea and Japan, tolerated to varying degrees by its former allies in China and Russia, Pyongyang continues to labor under acute economic dysfunction and extraordinary militarization, including nuclear and missile programs opposed by the United States and by all surrounding powers. Its intermittent use of force against South Korea, and its repeated threats to undertake additional attacks against the ROK, reflects its enduring hostility toward the South Korean system and political leadership. Equally important, the ROK has stated unequivocally that (in the event of any renewed attacks by the North) it will now retaliate, underscoring the latent volatility of the Korean peninsula that could quickly embroil the United States and China.

The immediate source of instability, however, concerns North Korea's political future. In December 2011, following the death of Kim Jong Il, the state undertook its second dynastic succession- a political outcome unique in the socialist world. Power (at least formerly) has now passed to Kim Jong Un, the elder Kim's youngest and untested son. North Korea has had only three leaders in its nearly 65-year history: Kim Il Sung, founder of the state and its unquestioned leader for 46 years; his eldest son Kim Jong Il, who led the DPRK for the next 17 years; and now Kim Jong Un. Many analysts believe that the succession to young Kim will unleash long-suppressed internal contradictions and cleavages that will lead to a major internal crisis. There is a widespread assumption that North Korea cannot indefinitely defy the laws of economic and political gravity, leading either to a profound realignment of political forces within the North or the outright end of the regime.

However, North Korea has long confounded such expectations. There have been repeated cycles of what Nicholas Eberstadt characterizes as "collapsist" thinking over the past two decades, and all have come to naught. The DPRK has not only survived amidst grievous societal and economic circumstances (including a severe famine in the mid-1990s); in defiance of widespread international pressure and condemnation, it has twice detonated nuclear weapons, with its self-declared status as a "nuclear state" now enshrined in the latest version of the North Korean constitution. It has grimly persevered, deeming adversarial nationalism and the retention of absolute power by

the Kim family and those loyal to it the surest means of ensuring the durability of the regime.

Does the future portend more of the same? How might external actors affect the North's future? Regime propaganda presents the young Kim as a worthy successor to his father and grandfather (his physical resemblance and even his body language in comparison to Kim Il Sung seems almost uncanny) who has consolidated power in almost seamless fashion. But the outside world knows very little about the inner world of North Korean decision making, and the regime has few if any incentives to reveal more. Indeed, even China, upon whom the North depends heavily for economic aid, trade, food, and fuel, has a very limited understanding of the levers of power in the North. Though the Chinese decided to endorse the succession to young Kim in the aftermath of his father's severe stroke in the summer of 2008, very few Chinese officials have met him, and no senior official has traveled to the DPRK since the death of Kim Jong Il. Those around young Kim (i.e., members of his immediate family and other loyalists supporting and presumably guiding his transition) seek to advance his consolidation of power. It is thus far from certain that a senior Chinese visitor would even be welcome at this point in the succession process, though these circumstances seem unlikely to persist indefinitely.

External factors nevertheless warrant notice, especially in the event that the surface calm does not prove sustainable. The outcome of the ROK presidential election in December (with Pyongyang clearly seeking the election of a candidate on the left who would presumably be far better disposed toward the North than President Lee Myung Bak, who is regularly the object of exceptionally vile personal attacks in North Korean propaganda); the US presidential election and the possibility of future alterations in US policy, depending on the outcome of this November's election; and the possibilities of renewed Chinese policy debate about North Korea following the Chinese Communist Party's leadership succession will all affect the ability of outside powers to forestall or limit any prospective crisis that might yet develop.

Prevailing trends, however, do not suggest an imminent crisis. In the immediate aftermath of Kim Jong Il's death, many commentators and editorialists predicted the rapid unraveling of power atop the system. Six months after his father's death, young Kim (at least by appearances) seems to be consolidating power. This has included the removal of a number of holdover officials (including three of the seven leaders who accompanied the funeral cortege in late December) and the promotion of others presumably loyal to Kim Jong Un and the small circle of senior officials around him. There has been heightened attention to the role of the Korean Workers Party, continuing a trend evident in Kim Jong Il's last years in power. Even more remarkably, Chae Ryong Hae, a civilian and formerly a KWP Secretary, has been

appointed head of the Army's General Political Department, where (despite the regime's adherence to a "military first" strategy) he outranks all military commanders in the leadership hierarchy. Changes in the leadership of the internal security apparatus have also been widespread. To be sure, such moves do not preclude that young Kim must maneuver among various competing forces within the system, or even the possibility that he wields very little independent power, and instead is largely a façade or figurehead largely responsible for preserving the claims of the Kim family to absolute power. However, even if actual power relationships point to one of the latter possibilities, recent leadership changes do not suggest an incapacitated system.

At the same time, young Kim is being portrayed in ways very different than his father. Kim Jong Il had a political apprenticeship that spanned twenty years before succeeding his father. Kim Jong Un had no such advantage, and either he or those supporting him concluded that there was no time to waste in installing him in power. Despite young Kim's minimal preparations and very limited experience, his formal accession to top leadership was never in serious doubt. There was a three year period of official mourning following Kim Il Sung's death, but there was virtually no mourning period at all for Kim Jong Il. In early January, only weeks after his father's death, young Kim began extensive internal travels and familiarization tours with major military units and political and economic institutions; his demeanor and ready physical contact with the personnel in various units suggested someone much more at ease with subordinates than his father had been. For example, in more than three decades in the public eye dating from his official designation as successor to Kim Il Sung in 1980, Kim Jong Il never once gave a public speech. Kim Jong Un has already given two major public addresses, including a live broadcast commemorating the 100th anniversary of his grandfather's birth. Indeed, his physical similarity to his grandfather and his more extroverted demeanor supposedly has many North Korean citizens viewing his emergence as the equivalent to the second coming, or at least enabling remembrance of a bygone era that looks far better than the present.

None of these factors invalidate the reality that North Korea (especially beyond the bright lights of Pyongyang, such as they are) is an acutely damaged society, and that the world has passed it by. The regime confronts acute food shortages, extreme limitations in energy supply, a severely damaged industrial and transportation infrastructure, widespread misallocation of resources, and deep anxieties about the possible loss of control, especially if the North's leadership concludes that it has no credible alternative but to open its doors more widely, especially if it wants to limit its dependence on China. Even under prevailing conditions, information is disseminating more widely in the North, simultaneous with ever larger economic disparities between privileged elites and the citizenry. (There are now reportedly one million cell phones

in the North, ironically furnished by Orascom, an Egyptian multinational. This may provide the means for more communication within the populace, but it also provides additional means to monitor communication.) North Korea also seems somewhat “leakier” than in the past, and there is an increased presence of foreign news agencies and newspapers.

However, the prospects for a major economic transition, even assuming the leadership is ultimately prepared to incur the risks, are highly inauspicious. In the six months since Kim Jong Il’s death, the leadership has sought to present itself as a normal state desirous of fuller relations with the outside world and intent on greatly heightened attention to economic betterment. But with the exception of China no major economic power has been prepared to undertake meaningful economic relations with the DPRK. Its missile and nuclear programs and the imposition of UNSC sanctions (though allowing for normal commercial ties and civilian economic development) and its acute hostility directed against the South and against Japan severely limit the possibilities for expanded external economic relations. The leadership nonetheless calculates that the passage of time will inure the outside world to its prior egregious behavior, with Pyongyang retaining its weapons programs or its longer-term potential to expand these capabilities.

There have also been changes in the DPRK’s overt behavior that at times suggest a more resourceful external strategy. Two and a half months following Kim’s death, Washington and Pyongyang on February 29 simultaneously announced understandings whereby Pyongyang would cease various nuclear activities underway at its nuclear complex at Yongbyon and forego any long-range missile tests or additional nuclear tests, in exchange for various US statements of non-hostile intent and the resumption of food aid. These understandings abruptly collapsed two weeks later, when North Korea on March 16 announced its intention to attempt another satellite launch, claiming that a satellite launch was separable from its supposed pledge to forego long-range missile tests. The Obama Administration rejected all of Pyongyang’s claims, stating that there had been no ambiguity at all to its insistence on no long-range missile tests (inclusive of satellite launches) or on North Korea’s clear understanding of US expectations. In retrospect, it seems clear that Pyongyang was intent on a missile launch to commemorate Kim Il Sung’s centennial, but it somehow believed the United States would be so invested in a supposed breakthrough with North Korea that it would accede to the test. This was a grievous miscalculation on Pyongyang’s part, and (despite the North’s subsequent statements that it wants to return to the February 29 agreement) the Obama Administration has no interest in enabling Pyongyang to pick up where it left off.

But several of the outcomes of the attempted satellite test warrant notice. First, unlike the attempted launches of 1998 and 2006, North Korea (having given far greater publicity to the launch) admitted within hours that the test had failed. There have been some claims that the decision to publicize the failure was made by Kim Jong Un, though there is no way to know for certain. However, there is every reason to believe that (had Kim Jong Il still been alive) he would have claimed the test was successful, repeating the fraudulent claims on the two prior occasions. Second, and perhaps even more important, the DPRK departed from the script followed in 2006 and 2009, when failed missile launches were soon followed by nuclear tests. In both prior instances, UNSC decisions following the missile failures (one a resolution condemning the test and imposing sanctions, the other a Presidential statement) triggered highly detailed, unequivocal statements from North Korea promising nuclear tests. In 2012, however, North Korea characterized the UNSC actions as an offense to its sovereignty and to its dignity, not a threat to its national security. Though it claimed that it was no longer bound to the pledged restraints made in its February 29 announcement, it did not make any explicit threat to conduct a third nuclear test, which many observers anticipated in light of observable activity at its nuclear test site. Indeed, when the UNSC subsequently decided to sanction three additional North Korean companies, there was no reaction at all from North Korean media.

In a recent statement, North Korea has offered an artful declaration that it has “no plans” to undertake another nuclear test “at this time.” There may be multiple reasons for a “not now” policy. First, Pyongyang may calculate that a third nuclear test will dash its hopes for the election in December of a South Korean leader ready to conciliate the North in a manner comparable to Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, Lee Myung Bak’s predecessors. Second, it is possible that China has warned North Korea of unspecified severe consequences should it again test a nuclear weapon. Third, it is possible that North Korea has sufficient confidence in its weapons design that it sees no need to test again. Fourth, it is possible that North Korea is at work on a different weapons design, but is not yet convinced that it has a workable design, and that it cannot risk a failed test. Fifth, North Korea already claims that it is a fully developed nuclear power, thereby obviating the need for additional tests, perhaps suggesting that an essentially symbolic capability is sufficient for its purposes.

But is it imaginable that North Korea would stop at two tests and not proceed with additional nuclear weapons development? Barring a profound strategic reassessment in Pyongyang, this seems very doubtful. As Siegfried Hecker has repeatedly observed, a credible nuclear force will require additional tests. The question then becomes one largely of timing and technical readiness. A plausible case can be made

that Pyongyang will wait until early 2013, when elections will have been held in the United States and South Korea and when new leaders will be installed in China. Time will tell, but a “not now” decision does not mean “never.”

All outside powers are in a state of watchful waiting about North Korea, perhaps especially China. There may be virtue in buying time, particularly if Pyongyang (at least for now) is prepared to forego another nuclear test. China may genuinely believe that the DPRK will ultimately have no alternative but to move toward non-antagonistic relations with the outside world. For now, Beijing appears satisfied with a more predictable relationship with its often defiant neighbor, in the expectation that a consolidated leadership will ultimately arrive at very different calculations about its long-term future, assuming there can indeed be such a future. In turn, China may believe that over the longer term it will acquire more of a capacity to shape internal outcomes in North Korea, despite widespread recognition in Chinese strategic circles that Pyongyang has long been more a liability than an asset. China’s strategy of risk avoidance has failed to prevent outcomes highly prejudicial to Chinese interests, and it also leaves denuclearization very much a subordinate Chinese policy objective. Beijing may well at some level fear the possibility of an internal meltdown, even if North Korea’s durability and grim persistence argues against it. But China’s larger if seldom spoken fears are of North Korea undertaking dangerous actions that Beijing is unable to prevent, triggering an escalatory crisis between the two Koreas that then draws in the US and China. Such a prospect must be deeply sobering in Beijing, but it has yet to move leaders in China to deal fully and forthrightly with either Seoul or Washington on the risks to regional peace and stability. The ultimate source of such insecurity is defined by an acutely adversarial North Korea whose fears are generated not by external threats, but by its tortured history and its deep internal vulnerabilities. Is there a way out short of war, and what if North Korea’s circumstances become even more untenable? This issue should be at the forefront of any serious discussions of Northeast Asia’s strategic future.