

This opinion piece “Incentives for North Korea's soft landing” by PCI Board Member Chung-in Moon and John Delury appeared in the Korea Times on December 20, 2011.

Incentives for North Korea's soft landing

By John Delury & Moon Chung-in

After 17 years at the helm, the “Dear Leader” is no more, and suddenly we are faced with a reality on which so much “contingency planning” has been based. So, what can we expect of the next chapter in North Korea’s political history?

And how ought the key players — South Korea, the United States and China — navigate this sensitive and critical transition period?

To date, we see no evidence of near-term political crisis or confusion as to the new pecking order; no sign of immediate factional struggles, popular revolt or systemic breakdown. In this “Year of the Protestor,” when dictators were overthrown, tried and shot, there remains no hint of a “Pyongyang Spring” to come, and Kim Jong-il died of natural causes.

Why is a near-term crisis unlikely? For the same reason that a senior North Korea official told one of us that the comparison of North Korea to Libya was “laughable”: North Korea’s political system is unified around its new face, grandson Kim Jong-un. Think of him surrounded and protected, by three inner circles. The first circle is the ruling family — here, the key sign of unity is that Jong-un’s aunt and her powerful husband Jang Song-thaek both received promotions along with the heir-apparent at the historic congress last year. The second inner circle is the Korean Workers’ Party, which has been going through a period of resuscitation in recent years. The revitalized network of party members, who now carry cell phones and are eager to travel abroad, see their prospects linked to the success of the grandson.

The third circle is the military, which would be the logical competitors with the next generation Kim — but here too, there is no sign of high-level disaffection, like that in many Arab Spring states. The military has been the primary beneficiary of the ‘military-first politics’ campaign which Kim Jong-il initiated in 1995. In addition, Kim has co-opted the military through numerous incentives, while controlling it through his close confidants. So far, the military has pledged its unfailing loyalty to Kim Jong-un.

But what then of the outer circle, the 20 million or so North Koreans not in the party, not members of the “core” class? Even those who may wish to rebel have no networks or organizations through which to do so — there are not even the rudiments of civil society to organize resistance. For now, all signs point to what the state media is saying; Kim Jong-un is the “outstanding leader of our party, army and people” and “great successor” to his father.

International Response

So, the essential question: What is to be done? The most prudent course for key players in the region is to re-open or expand channels with Pyongyang in the days, weeks and months to come. The better we know the new leadership, the better we can respond to events as they unfold. For now, we expect Pyongyang to turn inward, focusing on the funeral and mourning of their leader. And Kim Jong-un may take a backseat even for a period of three years in accordance with Korean mourning traditions and the precedent set by his father after his grandfather’s death in 1994. The more that Seoul, Washington and Beijing can do to draw out the new North Korean leaders, the better.

Fortunately, the United States has some modest positive momentum to build on in crafting this kind of proactive diplomatic outreach. It can build on recent Washington-Pyongyang bilateral talks on issues ranging from humanitarian aid to denuclearization, signaling readiness to work with the new powers in Pyongyang in a constructive fashion. The key precedent is the bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea that were thrown into doubt by the sudden death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. At that time, officials of the Bill Clinton administration stayed engaged, and Kim Jong-il sure enough signed the Agreed Framework, which froze the North Korean nuclear program for the rest of the 1990s. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would be wise to take a page out of President Clinton’s handling of that critical moment.

Seoul's reaction is even more crucial, and delicate. The South Korean public is divided over inter-Korean relations, and President Lee Myung-bak will take a hit whichever way he steps. But there have been increasing signs of fatigue with a hard-line approach, and this president, who has proven his conservative credentials, is uniquely positioned for a kind of "Nixon in China" moment. That may be a bridge too far for the Blue House. But at a minimum, prudence would dictate avoiding any sign of an offensive or threatening posture. Self-restraint in Seoul will encourage moderation in Pyongyang. And an expression of condolence, even an official mourning delegation such as North Korea sent to the South after the death of Kim Dae-jung, would be a bold statement of Korean solidarity in the face of ideological division.

For years, political analysts and military planners have discussed "contingency plans" for after the death of Kim Jong-il. But now, with Kim actually dead and no sign of chaos or collapse, what we need is prudent and realistic diplomacy that lays foundations today for progress tomorrow. Down the road, the Kim Jong-un leadership is likely to shift from "military-first" to "security plus prosperity." The regime has promised not just a "strong", but also a "prosperous" great nation — "Gangsong Daeguk." Real economic development will require foreign investment, trade, and financing; in other words, lifting of sanctions that surround the North Korean economy like a barbed wire fence. Seeing those sanctions lifted will require substantive nuclear concessions on Pyongyang's part.

It is in that moment, the transition from security-only to security-plus-prosperity, when the unity of the North Korean political system would come under strain. Elements in the military might oppose sacrificing their prize possession. Hardliners will argue it would be a fool's errand to give up the ultimate weapon, leaving their country exposed to an Iraqi or Libyan fate. Therefore, the path to getting North Korea over that hump starts now, with the building of constructive relationships with its new leadership and avoid playing into the hands of hardliners.

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