

This opinion piece "Will Kim's death aid US ties?" by PCI Board Member Amb. Don Gregg appeared on the BBC website on December 19, 2011.

Viewpoint: Will Kim's death aid US ties?

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How world leaders react to Mr Kim's death will determine ties with the new regime

Kim Jong-il's death should not have come as a complete surprise to anyone, given his tenuous health.

But it is safe to say that the North Koreans would have very much preferred that he lived one more year, so that in 2012, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, his father, Kim Jong-il would have been on hand to pay homage to "the Great Leader".

Now that lot will fall to Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's youngest son who has been put forward as the natural and fully prepared successor to his father.

I'm sure there is great scurrying around, particularly in Seoul and Washington, so that our responses are well co-ordinated.

That is as it should be, but my hope is that the succession process in Pyongyang will be allowed to play out.

I hope that the US will accept Kim Jong-un's succession in as gracious a manner as possible.

The first responses from Washington, Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing will be weighed very carefully by Pyongyang, and will have considerable impact on future relations with the countries concerned.

When Kim Il-sung died in 1994, the rather rude remarks made by the South Korean president at that time, Kim Young-sam, soured relations for the remainder of his presidency.

In contrast, Bill Clinton's more courteous remarks paved the way for the signing of the Agreed Framework, covering North Korea's nuclear developments, late in 1994.

I think it is very positive that just a few days ago US and North Korean officials met in Beijing to discuss modalities for a resumption of American economic aid to the North.

This was a step forward, and we should attempt to build upon it.

Kim Jong-un was educated in part in Switzerland, speaks some English, and knows far more about the West than either his father or his grandfather. This is also potentially positive.

Finally, it should be recognised that the politics of South Korea are quite tumultuous, and that their presidential election comes shortly after ours.

It is quite possible that South Korea's next president may take a softer line toward the North than that of the current president, Lee Myung-bak.

So all in all, I take Kim Jong-il's death as a natural event, that will be deeply mourned in North Korea, but may eventually open up a new and more hopeful chapter in Pyongyang's relations with the outside world.