



AFTER THE DEATH OF KIM JONG IL: EVERYTHING AND NOTHING HAS CHANGED

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The death of Kim Jong Il has sent shivers down the spine of many leaders in Asia and the world. In South Korea, the armed forces have been put on alert and Seoul has asked the U.S. to increase surveillance. The U.S. and South Korean governments have had several crisis meetings, including with the National Security Council. Japan has assembled a crisis management team on North Korea. All states in the region, and the U.S., are closely monitoring the developments on the Korean peninsula. Moreover, the financial markets have taken a hit due to increased uncertainties and rumors surrounding the death of Kim Jong Il.

In North Korea there are no extraordinary military movements going on despite the alleged missile tests. In fact, it could even be characterized as unusually silent considering the tremor Kim Jong Il's death has caused in North Korea. Reports of public outcries of sadness and grief are spreading. The majority of North Koreans looked upon Kim Jong Il as a great leader, and there is now a sense among them that they have been left on their own. Despite this, North Korea looks very stable and the transition of power to the young Kim Jong Un whom now is dubbed the "Great Successor" is well under way even if there are question marks for many outsiders if this will continue to be the case over time.

Power and Transition

In general there are no major changes short-term with the death of Kim Jong Il as the system still seems to be directed towards his final will and there are no indications of alternative leaders that could challenge Kim Jong Un publically. The North Korean armed forces have sided with the young Kim and it seems as if he will lend his rule to further strengthen the future of the military as the tradition has been under his father. This is not to say that there are no power struggles; there are in all normal political systems and North Korea is by no means an exception. The reality is that we don't necessarily know to what degree, who is involved or for what values they stand for.

Voices outside of North Korea have now and then raised the possibility of a military coup but the probability of this

occurring is small. However, the question remains how much power Kim Jong Un will have and when he will be able to consolidate it? Kim Jong Il waited three years before he took formal power in North Korea, partly due to respect for his father but mostly because him assuming his position was also not without complications. Kim Jong Un will most likely have to wait for some time before he can fully step into his father's shoes and during that time a collective leadership of the military, party and government will be established.

It seems very likely that such a political constellation will have a very strong military component, not only as a result of the Military First Policy but also due to the weakness of the civilian leadership and at the expense of the more liberal factions within North Korea. The question that would need to be asked is when and how much of the power will this group hand over when Kim Jong Un would officially take power. This is no easy question and one that only can be answered when we have more information about the internal developments of the political process in North Korea. Transparency in the political process would go a long way to decrease tension between the different actors and would decrease the possibility of mistakes.

Increased Insecurity on the Korean Peninsula

The most troubling factor in the short-term will be the increased insecurity that Kim Jong Il's death has brought. The lack of information has been very troubling. Rumors



are spreading regarding what has actually happened in North Korea and the alleged missile tests in the morning of December 19. There is a strong need among the parties to be very clear and concise in their communication and diplomatic signaling. North Korea, and its new young leader, is in a very exposed position at the moment and could react forcefully on what is interpreted as offensive actions that could further deteriorate relations in the region.

The new government and Kim Jong Un will need to prove its worth in the short term, mostly towards the military elite that will be a significant proportion of any collective government. It will most likely reduce the possibility to have any further nuclear talks and even more so to reduce the nuclear program. In many ways, the current development will take away the possibility to develop new strategies to open up the economy and increase dialogue; something that the North Korean army has been more reluctant to do than the civilian side.

Don Manzullo, chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on East Asia naively said that:

Kim Jong-Il was the epitome of evil, a dictator of the worst kind who ruled his country with an iron fist and dished out constant pain and misery to his people. We hope that his passing will mark a new chapter for North Korea. This is an opportunity for North Korea to emerge from its cycle of oppression and walk down a new path toward democracy.

The reality is of course that this will not happen but also that it is a possibility that the tension and insecurity will push the relations with North Korea back and boost the less open elements in North and South Korea at the expense of opening up and communication.

Restraint and Communication

Many people have wished for a major change in North Korea and a possible regime change. Short-term there will not

be much of a change even if long-term it could in fact be a move towards a more closed North Korea unless Kim Jong Un proves to be both a stronger and more liberal leader than we have anticipated. There has arguably never been a greater need to engage North Korea and to promote the opening up of the economy.

Short-term, it is important not to rock the boat and try to minimize the tension on the Korean Peninsula as it will only aggravate the situation and strengthen elements, on all sides, that would prefer increased tension and a radicalization of the situation. No government has anything to win with further instability and the markets are reacting with great sensitivity to the development.

Increased communication between the different leaders is needed and it could be an interesting attempt to use this moment to further engage the new government in Pyongyang with aid and open rather than close doors for communication. The question is if North Korea can and is willing to accept such offers in the short term? The reality is that Kim Jong Un is restrained by the political system he has inherited and there seems to be no willingness or possibility to move in any direction that is fundamentally new short-term. The long-term is another matter and some of the solutions are in the hands of the international community.

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