

LESSONS LEARNED FROM KIM'S CONDITION

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Kim Jong Il's failure to appear at the military review celebrating the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, considered by many to be a practically mandatory event for the leader of the North, has spun all corners of South Korean society into a clamor.

As the North Korean system is so tightly closed, it is difficult to verify the actual condition or severity of Kim Jong Il's health, but according to a number of analyses and speculation on a range of clues indicates that the accepted opinion now is that some time in mid-August, Kim's health faltered, he underwent brain surgery for a stroke, and is now in recovery.

It is true that it takes nothing more than for a health issue to spring up for the reclusive North Korean leader to become a factor of instability for the Korean Peninsula, but it also true that despite this latest ailment, the North Korean system does not appear to be operating abnormally or to have veered of course, but rather appears to be carrying on regularly. As we observe these latest events, it is necessary to make a calm assessment of the facts and draw proper lessons from them, rather than getting worked up without regard for the reality of the situation.

The biggest lesson drawn from this was that when North Korea's dictator, exercising complete control over the country, falls, the entire peninsula could erupt in chaos. Trouble for the North Korean leader is not something months or years away, but rather it is clear that we have already

entered a phase in which the death of Kim Jong Il is a possibility today. Therefore, it cannot be stressed enough that all of the possible scenarios for North Korea's future need to be laid out and thoroughly, precisely analyzed and prudent, detailed contingency plans can be adopted.

The current situation also presents itself as a wake-up call that the fall of the North Korean leader and the destabilizing impact that could have on the slowly progressing inter-Korean relations is a possibility that needs to be adequately planned for. North Korea's leadership vacuum and the possibility for sudden change could be upon us without warning. While the South Korean government has such a manual of contingency plans, this latest incident is a reminder of the need for a plan for every possible situation and variable, bar none.

That said, it also needs to be recognized that despite the need to have such a plan prepared, publicizing or emphasizing such a plan would unnecessarily incite North Korea. For the same reason, government officials and politicians should not leak such plans, either intentionally or through careless remarks. The government's manual should be prepared for use only in the case that such an event occurs, and under no circumstances be bragged about or released in order to agitate the North.

If we expect the worst, that is what we will always get. Regarding this incident as well, there are two extreme camps in South Korean society. On one hand, there are those who over-interpret the current situation as a sign of sudden change in the North. Despite reports that Kim Jong Il has come out of surgery and is on the road to recovery, this camp continues to speculate on the future changes in the system of authority or who the next North Korean

successor will be, as if this were an unmistakable prelude to the sudden change of North Korean leadership.

However, the current situation in the North is not one of a dead or dying leader but rather a situation in which he underwent a recoverable surgical procedure, and a political system in which there is no current possibility for power struggles or factional fighting. In fact, those in Pyongyang can be expected to take a fiercely loyal position in order to protect the leader and maintain the system. After his recovery, changes in the policy decision making process and leadership style will be unavoidable, but it is not yet possible to expect a decentralization of power or anything other than a supplementary measures to the existing system.

While this was the first military parade ever that Kim failed to attend, there has been no commotion in the regime organs nor any significant change in the attitude of the government. In the immediate aftermath of Kim's collapse and subsequent surgery, the halt to the dismantlement of nuclear facilities and subsequent public announcement of this decision is one indication that the government continues to function as it in the same manner as before. Therefore, calls to upgrade OPLAN 5029, the current contingency plan for sudden change in North Korea, to a joint U.S.-ROK military action plan is a premature overreaction.

Regarding unification issues, not only would the intervention of the U.S. military not be conducive to South Korean sovereignty, but U.S.-ROK joint military action could cause unrest in China and ultimately hinder unification efforts. Therefore, in light of the current situation, stressing OPLAN 5029 is an unacceptable option.

The other extreme is the expectation that sudden change in North Korea would easily bring about unification in the manner desired by South Korea. This means parking tanks in front of the Presidential Palace. The optimistic and emotional expectation that if only Kim Jong Il were to die, the North Korean regime would collapse, and all the problems would be solved is a far cry from reality. In the event that stable transition of the North Korean regime were not possible in the event of the death of the leader, North Korea's rapid change would bring about enormous instability for the entirety of the Korean Peninsula.

With unpredictable chaos among regime elite and uncontrollable leadership vacuum, not to mention large-scale refugee exodus and the possibility of Chinese intervention, this situation would absolutely not guarantee unification in the manner preferred by the South. An emotional approach should be avoided. Ideally, a calm, collected approach would reveal that North Korea's stability means peninsular stability, and, along the same lines, a sudden change in the North could pitch the South into turmoil, as well.

Ultimately, from a South Korean perspective, the best future scenario for North Korea is a stable power transition together with gradual reform and opening as well as a decentralization of power under the leadership of a new ruler. This would mean North Korea naturally and willfully transforming the system as the unification process takes the form of an inter-Korean common economic community coming about along with improvement of the inter-Korean relationship in a peaceful, gradual manner. The most useful option for South Korea would not be that of the North crashing down like a debilitated airplane, but rather, for Seoul to facilitate a slow, steady glide, bringing the North in for a soft landing.

If this is to happen, then what is best for South Korea is not a sudden, unplanned shift in the North, but rather to observe Kim Jong Il's leadership and best prepare for succession without agitating the ruling class, thus allowing for a natural transfer of power to occur.

What this latest situation has shown us is that even if a sudden change were to occur, for South Korea to be able to control the situation and to welcome North Korea's ruling elite to Seoul rather than Beijing, what is necessary is not talk of the North's sudden demise but rather a consistent policy on North Korea that welcomes stable system transformation and that will support inter-Korean relations in a manner that will positively influence North Korea's perspective of the South.