

The New Kim Jong-un Era: What Do We Do Next?

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With the sudden death of Kim Jong-il and the ensuing end of his era, the 29 year-old son and successor Kim Jong-un has stepped up on the DPRK leadership stage. Like it or not, nations must deal with the new leader from now on. The unanimity of voices (of the major powers in the region) calling for “peace, stability and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula,” must now try to harmonize with the young successor of the DPRK.

Right before the passing of Kim Jong-il, the attention of the most area experts were fixed on the upcoming 2012 political elections/power successions that will take place in South Korea and neighboring countries. Proponents of “regime collapse” in North Korea were caught off guard by the sudden death of the elder Kim – as we all were. No one predicted or even suspected this kind of “shock” to emanate from North Korea and shake the peninsular and regional stability.

However, the North Korean leadership under Kim Jong-un demonstrated certain swiftness and capability in dealing with its “national tragedy” – the death of Kim Jong-il. The leadership was also quick to act in constructing the basic principles of the ruling system. The two most influential states, China and the United States chose to recognize the “new leadership” of Kim Jong-un. The three-year succession process launched back in 2008 does seem worthy of recognition on various levels. In anyway, the Kim Jong-un leadership has set sail.

When considering peace and stability, denuclearization and unification on the Korean peninsula is a shared goal of the region. Many actors in the region also desire the smooth sailing of Kim Jong-un’s leadership system for the sake of regional stability. If so, where do we go from here? In particular, with the structural instability of Kim Jong-un’s leadership expected to persist for at least the mid-term, prolonging the uncertain strategic environment of Northeast Asia, then what options are available for actors to minimize the lingering uncertainties and possible instability?

To put it another way, creating a stable security environment in the Korean peninsula is related with the strategic thinking and choices that we make. Often times, security and peace are treated as grandiose concepts; but the essence behind these terms is simple: provide citizens in the region with the desired security and peace.

Moreover, the stability of Kim Jong-un leadership will waver on the issues of reform, opening up and denuclearization. Overcoming the country’s economic difficulties and changing the current antagonistic foreign relations will be the most critical task the North Korea leadership faces. This includes the improvement of both the US-DPRK and the inter-Korean relations. In principle, all the actors in the region support some process of reform and opening in North Korea. However, at present, it would appear that China is the only country that truly supports this. The conservative government in Seoul, along with Washington – both of whom perceive North Korea as a threat and adversary – has continued with the policy of sanctions toward the DPRK, which has only impeded reform.

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Denuclearization is also an extremely difficult matter. The resolution of the nuclear issue can only come via dialogue and negotiations. Specifically, the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement must be fulfilled for the advancement of the Six-Party Talks. No other options exist. The United States and South Korea must show a firm willingness for denuclearization diplomacy, otherwise North Korea will become a nuclear state. This "Pakistan scenario" for North Korea will be detrimental for the Korean peninsula and affect the daily lives of the Korean people. In order to avoid this worst-case scenario, the severed relations between the South and the North must be retied. Improving the inter-Korean relations is not only an important resource for the sake of the two Koreas but also could serve as a leverage to enhance the diplomatic relations with other states. The recent intelligence failure of the South Korean government is also somewhat connected with the deterioration of the inter-Korean relations. Shouldn't South Korea be the leading in gathering intelligence and assessing information on North Korea?

Furthermore, South Korea-China relations must be enhanced for better communication and policy cooperation. The recent interactions between the Chinese and South Korean leaderships clearly demonstrated the bruised bilateral relationship between the two nations. In order to encourage gradual progress toward unification via opening up of North Korea, South Korea must substantiate the alleged "strategic partnership" with China through specific actions and efforts.

The promotion of the ROK-US-China trilateral cooperation, albeit difficult, will be the utmost important assignment for the future of the Korean peninsula. The accomplishment of this difficult task will pave a way to diminish the instability and uncertainty. To do so, the prevailing confidence in the trilateral relations between the ROK-US-Japan must be reconsidered. In addition, flexibility, balance, and consideration must be restored in the South Korean diplomacy- both in strategies and actions.