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A chance for engagement with North Korea?

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WASHINGTON – America’s political silly season will rush toward a close with the November presidential election. Both party conventions are likely to be lively.

But these spectacles will fall short of the pageantry expected at this week’s communist party congress in North Korea. For the first time since 1980, before current leader Kim Jong Un was born, the Korean Workers Party (KWP) is gathering.

The delegates are convening in Pyongyang on Friday for the first party congress in 36 years. North Koreans only just finished a 70-day campaign to prepare for the grand event. In the North, appearances are everything.

Although the masses reportedly are marching as one behind the “Young Marshal,” the regime helpfully provides slogans as encouragement. When I visited years ago there were slogans in buildings, on buildings, over streets, on billboards and more.

One of the current slogans, reported Anna Fifield of The Washington Post, is “Let us all become honorary victors in the ‘70-day campaign’ of loyalty.” Turn your life over to others and feel good about yourself!

Of course, the regime isn’t quite so crass. It says the campaign is to “defend the leadership authority” of the KWP and resist the “U.S. imperialists.” At least Kim has emphasized economic development; his father, “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il, pushed a “military-first” policy.

The question for the North’s neighbors and the United States is why the congress? It is only the seventh in the North’s 68-year-history.

At the latter “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung inaugurated a system of monarchical communism when he announced that his son would succeed him. The more than 3,000 delegates also affirmed Kim’s philosophy of Juche, or self-reliance.

In succeeding years the party seemed to lose relevance. Kim instituted the rule of one, eventually augmented by the rise of Kim Jong Il. After the latter took over he shifted power toward the military and away from the KWP. A party congress would have been almost superfluous.

No longer, however. Since Kim Jong Un took over after his father’s death in December 2011, he has been reshaping Pyongyang’s power structure. He turfed out most of the top officials

appointed by and loyal to his father, and ruthlessly eliminated any challenge to his power. Moreover, Kim moved decision-making back to the KWP.

The party congress will emphatically re-establish the authority of the party, with Kim at the helm. The gathering also will solidify the rise of Kim's new generation of officials.

Although he looks secure from challenge, his promiscuous resort to execution suggests he feels otherwise. Indeed, Kim's rule might need bolstering. This month his regime suffered embarrassment from a raft of defections.

Moreover, Kim may use the congress to ratify his more reformist economic policies. The younger Kim appears committed to economic development, whether to improve the lot of his people or strengthen the nation which he rules.

The changes are dramatic enough—a proliferation of markets—as to require a more formal framework.

Kim likely will use the congress to formalize his new economic initiatives. Ruediger Frank of the University of Vienna observed: “all major reforms of state socialism—be it in China under Deng Xiaoping, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev or Vietnam under the slogan of ‘doi moi’ — have been announced at such regular party congresses or related events.”

A more robust and systematic program of economic reform may be the best hope for the North. Such a strategy obviously offers the greatest opportunity for the nation to escape from immiserating poverty.

Economic reform also creates the possibility of political liberalization. China has demonstrated that moving toward markets does not automatically deliver democracy. But the China of today is far freer in every way than during the rule of Mao Zedong. This may be why Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, resisted Chinese-style economic reforms.

Since nothing else yet has worked, Washington and its allies should greet the congress by expressing a willingness to talk to Pyongyang, and not only about nuclear weapons, which almost is certainly a dead end with the Kim dynasty. With war the worst of all possibilities and sanctions able to hurt but not transform, the North's neighbors and the U.S. need to explore other options.

America's political conventions will be consequential since they will determine who takes over the helm in Washington. But North Korea's political meet-up will offer the ultimate in political choreography.

It also could ratify a change of direction in Pyongyang. The U.S. and its allies should encourage such a possibility. While the chance of success might be small, that would be better than continuing today's dead-end approach.

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