



Doug Bandow: What's next for North Korea?

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2011-12-19 11:43:55

North Korea's "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il [is dead](#). There is now no prospect of negotiating and implementing a new nuclear agreement with the North in the near future. The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea is likely to be consumed with a [power struggle](#) which could turn violent. Washington's best policy option is to step back and observe.

After his stroke three years ago, Kim [anointed his youngest son](#), Kim Jong-un, as his [successor](#). However, the latter Kim has had little time to establish himself. The previous familial power transfer to Kim Jong-il took roughly two decades. There are several potential claimants to supreme authority in the North, and the military may play kingmaker.

Some observers hope for a "Korean Spring," but the DPRK's largely rural population is an unlikely vehicle for change. Urban elites may want reform, but not revolution. If a North Korean Mikhail Gorbachev is lurking in the background, he will have to move slowly to survive.

During this time of political uncertainty no official is likely to have the desire or ability to [make a deal](#) yielding up North Korea's nuclear weapons. The leadership will be focused inward and no one is likely to challenge the military, which itself may fracture politically.

Nor is China likely to play a helpful role. Beijing views the status quo as being in its interest. Above all else, China is likely to emphasize stability, though it may very well attempt to influence the succession process outside of public view. But China does not want what America wants, preferring the DPRK's survival, just with more responsible and pliable leadership.

Washington can do little during this process. The United States should maintain its willingness to talk with the North. American officials also [should engage Beijing](#) over the future of the peninsula, exploring Chinese concerns and searching for areas of compromise. For instance, Washington should pledge that there would be no American bases or troops in a reunited Korea, which might ease Beijing's fears about the impact of a North Korean collapse.

Most important, the Obama administration should not rush to "strengthen" the alliance with South Korea in response to uncertainty in the North. The Republic of Korea is well [able to defend itself](#). It should take the steps necessary to deter North Korean adventurism and develop its own strategies for dealing with Pyongyang. America should be withdrawing from an expensive security commitment which no longer serves U.S. interests.

Kim Jong-il imposed unimaginable hardship on the North Korean people. However, what follows him could be even worse if an uncertain power struggle breaks down into armed conflict. Other than encourage Beijing to use its influence to bring the Kim dynasty to a merciful end, the United States can—and should—do little more than watch developments in the North.

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