

**Doug Bandow***Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute*

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North Korea: Time for Washington to Step Back and Let South Korea Lead

North Korea's death extravaganza is over. "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il has been commemorated with all the official pomp and popular wailing due a monarch. His son, Kim Jong-un, has been proclaimed the new demi-god. The king is dead, long live the king.

Before Kim Jong Il's death, the Obama administration was apparently prepared to restart food aid for the impoverished totalitarian state. [That was a bad idea even then.](#) Washington should step back and watch events in the North, leaving South Korea to take the lead in dealing with its unpredictable neighbor.

The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea used Kim's funeral to project regime stability. Contemporaries of Kim Jong-un's father and grandfather proclaimed his supremacy. Elderly generals flanked him while young soldiers stood in serried ranks around him. Crowds cried and proclaimed their undying loyalty to Kim Jong-un.

He also received a veritable cascade of titles: great successor, military supreme commander, head of the Korean Workers Party Central Committee, "supreme leader of our party, military and people," and "sun of the 21st century." Likely soon to come is the ultimate honorific, equivalent to Great Leader (Kim Il Sung) and Dear Leader (Kim Jong Il).

Not bad for the improbable communist dauphin, a spoiled overweight twenty-something with no known accomplishments. However, Kim Jong-un's public enthronement was scripted to benefit the system, not the individual. The many Kim dynastic myths, starting with DPRK founder Kim Il-sung, have become central to the legitimacy of a regime now unable to feed its people (though obviously not a problem for the younger Kim). Thus, the new grand and glorious leader was tapped to embody the nation.

However, Kim Jong-un possesses no qualifications to rule and there is no proof that in practice he heads the government, or is even an important government decision-maker. His grandfather, Kim Il-sung, was a man of brutal accomplishment: guerrilla fighter, Soviet nominee to run Moscow's occupation zone in Korea, originator of the Korean War, and victor in numerous political battles. Kim grand-pere used those skills to anoint the ostentatiously unskilled and untested Kim Jong Il as his successor. The latter was moved up the party hierarchy as family members and fellow revolutionaries alike were shoved aside. When the senior Kim died in 1994, Kim Jong Il was ready and his succession appeared seamless. But even so, he waited to don the titles commensurate with his power.

Kim Jong Il only began to worry about the succession after his stroke in late 2008. Kim Jong-un was not formally unveiled to the North Korean public until last year. A couple years by his father's side probably did not give him control over the nation's Byzantine power lines. And resentment may be rife at one so inexperienced and unqualified--he is 25 years younger and far less experienced than his father when the latter gained the throne.

Moreover, Kim Jong-un did not rise alone. His aunt and uncle simultaneously gained prominence. The latter, Jang Song-taek, and army Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho, who went to school with Kim Jong Il, also were prominently featured during Pyongyang's ceremonies for the dear departed Kim Jong Il.

These three officials are said to be "regents" charged with shepherding the younger Kim toward power and position. The latter they apparently were willing to give immediately. They may not relax their grip on power quite so quickly.

Consider Jang. He has risen high, but his marriage to Kim Jong Il's sister originally was resisted by Kim Il-sung. Then Jang was purged and rehabilitated both by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong Il. The same could happen in the future: Sohn Kwang-joo of South Korea's Gyeonggi Research Institute predicted that Jang, "the most needed now, will become the first to be discarded with a titular post once Kim Jong-un is comfortable with his power."

Jang undoubtedly foresees this possibility. Even if he possesses familial affection for the younger Kim, Jang would prefer to be the one with supreme power. No doubt there are others who feel the same way. In a political system with no safety net there are many benefits to being the center rather than revolving around the center.

Nor is Kim [the only blood connection](#) to Kim Jong Il and, perhaps even more important, Kim Il-sung. Kim Jong Il apparently had seven acknowledged children. The eldest male, 40-year-old half-brother Kim Jong-nam, is in comfortable exile in Macao. The other male, Kim Jong-chol, 30, holds a mid-level party position in Pyongyang. (About the four daughters virtually nothing is known.) There also is a half-uncle, the DPRK ambassador to Poland. None play any overt political role today -- and were not seen at the funeral -- but conceivably could be wheeled out by a competing faction seeking primacy.

The military also may assert itself. Kim Jong Il last year promoted both his son and sister to four-star general, likely exciting contempt in the armed services. During the extended mourning ceremonies Jang appeared, as if in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera, for the first time in military uniform. Kim Jong Il consciously limited independent military action or communication, but one or more figures in the army might discover their moment, perhaps in league with civilian allies, in an unsettled environment with the untested son nominally at the helm. Victor Cha, who served in the Bush National Security Council, argued that the system "simply cannot hold."

Still, some observers discount the possibility of a decisive power struggle because leadership elites share an interest in regime stability. That likely explains the speedy public draping of the imperial purple over Kim Jong-un's ample girth and lock-step presence of party and military officials around him. For them, the most important objective is to protect the system.

Already there is evidence that years of hardship and starvation have reduced the effectiveness of government propaganda. To directly challenge the Kim dynasty would risk bringing down, Samson-like, the entire temple. As Dan Pinkston of the International Crisis Group argued, it would be difficult "to oust Kim Jong-un and renounce the dynasty."

But affirming the formal succession and preserving the Kim family façade is a very different than supporting Kim Jong-un's rule. North Korean communism is both weirdly monarchical and extravagantly kleptocratic. Preserving special privileges in the always impoverished, sometimes starving nation is the most important priority for anyone within the leadership elite. That requires sustaining Pyongyang as a vampire state for the benefit of the party and military. In this way, noted *Time's* Bill Powell, "it may well be that the young, inexperienced Kim Jong-un works for them now, not the other way around."

Kim, who turns 28 (many analysts think) on January 8 does have the advantage of age -- Jang, for instance, is 65 -- and might ultimately prevail if he can remain at the intersection of competing factions, none with sufficient strength to achieve primacy. However, no one is likely to defer to him because of his name. If he wants to be more than a plump ornament at parades and rallies, Kim had better possess his grandfather's ruthless *Wille zur Macht*, or will to power.

Of course, many people outside and perhaps inside the tortured nation hope for a popular uprising. Indeed, the regime no longer can disguise the terrible, and terribly unnecessary, hardship suffered by the North Korea people. The Economist observed: "Mobile phones, cross-border profiteering, corruption and inequality have all flourished. The failed currency reforms led to unprecedented public anger. A few outsiders with contacts inside the country say North Koreans quietly mock the young heir who, educated in part at a smart Swiss boarding school, is hardly cut from the same revolutionary cloth as his grandfather."

However, urban elites have little incentive to push for a revolution which could devour them, while rural subjects lack the knowledge, resources, and opportunity necessary to revolt. Some observers predicted the imminent demise of the regime after Kim Jong Il succeeded his father. It would be foolish to similarly expect the latest Kim to quickly fade away.

How then to deal with the new North Korea? Kim Jong Il well-played a weak hand, using a nuclear program of inconclusive success to extort summits, cash payments, fertilizer, food, tourism, and the Kaesong investment zone from the South. At the same time, Pyongyang continued to develop nuclear weapons and longer-range missiles, as well as sink a South Korean naval vessel and bombard a South Korean island.

Relations with the U.S. (and the South) went into a well-deserved deep freeze, with the end of most talks, aid, and economic relations. But the DPRK has been seeking to get back on the gravy train. At the funeral Kim Yong-nam, North Korea's formal head of state, told visiting South Koreans that the North wanted to reactivate its trade and investment agreements with the ROK.

However, Pyongyang offered nothing in return, telling the world not to "expect any changes from us." Indeed, the regime announced that the "Korean people will accomplish the cause of Songun," the ominous "military first" policy promoted by Kim Jong Il, "under leadership of Kim Jong-un."

Moreover, since Seoul refused to send an official funeral delegation, the North threatened the ROK with "unpredictable catastrophic consequences." Failing to show respect to Kim Jong Il's memory, warned Pyongyang, could "completely derail" bilateral relations and the North would "never engage" the current government of "traitors" in South Korea. Indeed, explained the DPRK: "The sea of bloody tears from our military and people will follow the puppet regime until the end. The tears will turn into a sea of revengeful fire that burns everything."

While such florid rhetoric is typical and therefore does not indicate that conflict is more likely than usual, these bombastic attacks also suggest that the regime has little interest in working to improve relations with the West. Still, the Obama administration should indicate its willingness to engage the new regime and reward any positive movement in Pyongyang, however unlikely that might be.

But there [should be no foreign aid, even food](#), for a system which remains unremittingly hostile and dangerous. Unfortunately, the North sees even humanitarian assistance as a political concession, and uses foreign assistance to relieve the burden of feeding its own people. Rumor has it that even rations for the military and Pyongyang apparatchiks have been reduced. Washington should not help the DPRK feed the regime's strongest supporters.

Moreover, American policymakers should have no illusions about negotiating away the North's nuclear program, especially in the near term. [Kim Jong Il evinced no interest in](#)

[giving up](#) any existing weapons, presumably because even a small atomic arsenal provides substantial benefits: powerful defense deterrent, means to grab international attention, threat to extort lucrative benefits, payoff to win support of military leaders. Moreover, with less than firm political command Kim Jong-un and anyone else contending for power would be foolish to challenge the military by proposing to trade away the latter's premier asset.

There still is reason for Washington to engage the North. The latter appears less likely to provoke its adversaries when it is negotiating with them, and secondary objectives may be achievable at reasonable cost. But no significant concessions should be made to attract the DPRK back to the Six Party Talks or other diplomatic forums.

More important would be discrete yet substantive discussions among the U.S., Japan, ROK, and China. What can be done to press the North to be a more responsible regional player? How should the countries cooperate if North Korea implodes? What shared approach would best promote peace and stability? In particular, is there anything the U.S., South Korea, and Japan could do [to encourage Beijing](#) to take serious action against an uncooperative DPRK?

Kim Jong Il will be long remembered, but not fondly, especially by the many North Koreans who were imprisoned, executed, impoverished, or starved by him. But as long as his policies remain in force, the North's future remains dismal. The U.S. should watch for glimmers of reform while backing away, [allowing South Korea to deal with](#) whatever emerges in Pyongyang.