

08-09-2009 16:08

   PRINT

## Who's in Charge?

By Doug Bandow

Former U.S. President George W. Bush famously said that he "loathed" North Korea's Kim Jong-il. However, with an impending leadership change in Pyongyang, diplomatic solutions are likely to become even less likely, despite former President Bill Clinton's recent visit.



The 67-year-old Kim allegedly suffered a stroke in August and disappeared from public view for months. When he reappeared he looked gaunt and sickly. Kim is thought to be afflicted with diabetes and heart disease and has been rumored to have cancer.

Since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in 1948, only two men have held supreme power: Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994, and his son, Kim Jong-il. The latter's rise to power was carefully orchestrated by his father.

Since the 1994 Agreed Framework, the North also has engaged in an on-and-off negotiation with the U.S. and North Korea's neighbors over ending its nuclear program.

Despite the common assumption that the North was willing to deal, Pyongyang had obvious reasons to reject even a seemingly generous offer. Nuclear weapons offer the North security assurance, international status, and extortion opportunities.

Still, hope of a solution rose in the aftermath of the October 2007 denuclearization agreement. Alas, North Korea subsequently denounced the arrangement, expelled international inspectors, and even renounced the 1953 Armistice. Earlier this year Pyongyang conducted a nuclear test and several missile tests.

None of this means that North Korea could not come back to the table. The Clinton visit demonstrates that surprises are ever possible. However, today there is increasing doubt that the DPRK will abandon its nuclear program, let alone yield up its existing nuclear materials.

Moreover, North Korea's current internal instability will make reaching a deal even more difficult.

The military is central to Kim's rule. He has long pushed a "military first" policy. In his prime Kim may have had sufficient authority to sacrifice the military's most powerful weapon as part of a political deal. A seriously ill Kim may not. A transitional collective leadership likely would not.

The North already is restricting private markets and closing up the little private space that had recently opened up. Equally significant is the rising influence of the military.

Kim may have decided he must placate an institution capable of ratifying or blocking any leadership transition; the military may have become more demanding in the wake of his incapacity.

This would explain the rapid multiple international provocations, punctuated by the nuclear and missile tests. Moreover, the National Defense Commission, of which Kim is chairman, is gaining internal authority.

Even more problematic is the leadership transition. The uncertainty created by Kim's condition is compounded by the age of many other top officials. For instance, 81-year-old Kim Yong-nam is chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly and

nominal head of state.

Moreover, North Korea has evolved into the modern equivalent of the Ottoman Empire. "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung was married twice and had many other relationships.

Kim Jong-il apparently has had four wives or long-term mistresses. The result has been several children from different spouses as well as a number of illegitimate children.

Earlier this year Kim apparently designated 26-year-old Kim Jong-un, his youngest son, as his heir. However, unless Kim Jong-il survives and rules for at least several years, the younger Kim is unlikely to have an easy time claiming his political inheritance in a culture that typically reveres age — and in which potential rivals are many.

The regime number two appears to be brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek, who might not be satisfied with playing a secondary role in the event of Kim Jong-il's death.

Many other senior officials have been waiting for years and even decades to take charge. Moreover, there are more than a few Kim family members available to front for competing factions, including Kim's half-brother, two other sons, and current wife/mistress.

How this international soap opera will turn out is anyone's guess. But it could have a significant impact on Pyongyang's relations with the rest of the world.

Given the horrors perpetuated by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, it is hard to imagine the situation getting worse in the DPRK.

However, overt factionalism, a brutal power struggle, and political instability would add an incendiary element to peninsula affairs. At the very least, an insecure leader, weak collective rule, and/or de facto military rule all would make North Korean concessions on the nuclear issue even less likely.

The U.S. and South Korea should continue diplomatic efforts, both bilateral and multilateral. Moreover, both governments should intensify efforts to involve Japan and engage China in a concerted campaign to pressure Pyongyang and/or seek to effect regime change.

At the same time, however, policymakers must realistically assess the future. The U.S. and North Korea's neighbors had better prepare for the possibility of an even more unsettled and dangerous future.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and the author of several books, including "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy" (Cato Institute) and "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations With North and South Korea" (Palgrave/Macmillan, co-author). This article is adapted from National Interest online. He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com.*