

Containing Pyongyang

Doug Bandow | August 13, 2012

Dear Leader Kim Jong-il has been dead for eight months. A lot and not much has changed in North Korea, leaving U.S. policy in suspense. Kim Jong-un, officially the “Great Successor” but more aptly nicknamed the “Cute Leader,” has changed the atmosphere in Pyongyang. He’s taken his attractive young wife about town, surrounded himself with children and projected a populist image.

Yet the regime has made and broken another nuclear agreement, threatened South Korea with death and destruction, and tightened border enforcement with China. In July, Pyongyang accused U.S. and South Korean agents of planning to destroy statues of Great Leader Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, “a war action as serious as the armed invasion.” Talk of economic reform remains a South Korean hope rather than North Korean reality.

Great Leader Kim Il-sung ruled the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea from its founding in 1948 until his death in 1994. He spent roughly two decades making his son, Kim Jong-il, into heir apparent. By the elder Kim’s final days, Kim fils was running the government.

Kim Jong-il didn’t start a similar process with Kim Jong-un—thought to be twenty-nine years old, he is the youngest of three sons—until after suffering a debilitating stroke in August 2008. The younger Kim quickly acquired positions, titles and three mentors to help guide him to supreme power: his uncle Jang Song-taek, aunt Kim Gyong-hui and army chief of staff Ri Yong-ho. However, the transition process had barely begun before the Dear Leader died last December.

Everything looked calm as the Great Successor played the great mourner. Policy remained unchanged. The regime completed negotiations begun before Kim Jong-il’s death with Washington on an aid agreement—and then promptly violated it, just as in the past.

In July came the “retirement” for “health” reasons of Vice Marshal Ri, one of the three regents anointed by Kim Jong-il, and the naming of Kim Jong-un as a “marshal” in the military. Evans Revere of the Brookings Institution argued that Kim was “wasting no time in consolidating his rule.” The International Crisis Group posited several factors supporting “the continuation of an extremely concentrated, one-man dictatorship” and concluded: “No person or group is likely to challenge” Kim.

Power Struggles

The declaration of Kim Jong-un's political victory is premature. The cascade of titles following his father's death was more a sign of weakness than strength, an attempt to invest him with gravitas obviously lacking. While the *nomenklatura* may be invested in the Kim cult—a Japanese newspaper reported that Jang told Kim Jong-il's first born, Kim Jong-nam, now living in disgrace in Macao, to stop criticizing the family power transfer—top officials are not likely similarly committed to Kim Jong-un as dictator.

To the contrary, more than a few aspirants to power probably believe it is time for someone other than a Kim to rule. And Kim Jong-un appears ill-equipped to battle for control. Perhaps he is more serious than his background and demeanor suggest, but he has spent little time grappling with the snakes and scorpions that fill Pyongyang's corridors of power. In contrast, Kim Jong-il maneuvered for twenty years under his father's guidance.

A more plausible contender is Jang, who is half of the powerful tandem with Kim Jong-il's younger sister. Jang took on an important role in internal security under Kim and acted as the latter's stand-in after his stroke. He later was added as a vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and an alternate member of the Politburo—and elevated to full membership after Kim Jong-il's death.

Jang understands the danger of merely orbiting the supreme leader: he twice disappeared from public view, apparently falling from favor under both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Moreover, last year Kim Jong-il reportedly limited Jang's authority, perhaps in an attempt to enhance Kim Jong-un's position as heir apparent.

No one knows the family dynamic, though Jang originally may have been closer to Kim Jong-nam. Even if there is genuine affection between Kim Jong-un and his uncle, Jang no doubt would prefer to eliminate any chance that his nephew might decide to dispense with his services in the future.

Moreover, Ri's ouster looks more like consolidation of power by Jang than Kim. If Kim already was exercising supreme authority, he didn't need to defenestrate Ri. Kim might have wanted to kick off "the training wheels," as Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations put it, but there was no hurry to do so.

In contrast, in a system of collective leadership Jang and army chief Ri were direct rivals. Moreover, Ri's ouster followed the appointment of Jang ally Choe Ryong-hae as vice marshal to oversee the army. That step challenged Ri by strengthening party control over the military. South Korean sources indicated that Jang and Choe together prepared to move against Ri by monitoring military units that the latter might attempt to deploy. The Chosun Ilbo quoted one South Korean official: "It appears that Jang loyalists meticulously plotted to retire Ri and other adversaries before they could consolidate their power base."

Moreover, U Tong-chuk, the North's deputy director of the state security department (in charge of the secret police), lost another major position and disappeared from public view in March. He once was a Jang protégé, but in 2011 Kim Jong-il dispensed with a rival of U's, perhaps to shift his loyalty to Kim Jong-un. U then was "in a position to serve as a counterweight to Jang's power within the security apparatus or, at the least, provide the heir apparent with situational awareness of his uncle's activities," argued Ken Gause of the research group CNA. If U has been purged—no official announcement has been made—Jang might be responsible.

Some observers speculate that substantive disagreements triggered Ri's removal, though that would not have required his abrupt dismissal. He may have opposed extending party control over the military and ending military control over economic and trading operations, both likely advocated by Jang.

In that case, Ri's removal would have simultaneously served Jang's political and policy ends.

Could Ri's ouster trigger regime instability? The firing apparently came after a special Politburo meeting to deal with an "organizational issue," suggesting a surprise political attack that may have caught the victim off guard. Nevertheless, the move was within the "rules of the game."

In contrast, one rumor had Ri wounded or killed as his bodyguards battled personnel sent to arrest him. If true, such an event would have caused visible alarm within the system. However, calm appears to prevail in Pyongyang.

But Ri's ouster, by challenging the status quo, could whet the appetites of others for power or instill fear that they are next on Jang's or Kim's political menu. If the power game is perceived as open, more people will want to play. Then, observed Snyder, "North Korea may become a truly volatile and unpredictable source of instability." Moreover, Jang, apparently well thought of in Beijing, might eventually want to sit on the throne himself.

Most unsettling may be an attempt by Jang or Kim to reduce the military's take of civilian resources. Ri's "retirement" does not threaten the military as an institution. However, reducing outlays on the overstuffed army and negotiating away the nuclear program would diminish the military and all in command. A coup would be difficult, but if top officers believed their role was at risk, all bets might be off.

Waiting for Change

Hope for change in the DPRK burns eternal. Kim Jong-un has talked about the importance of raising people's living standards and implementing economic reform, but his regime has simultaneously targeted private markets and stemmed

the flow of refugees into China. Official North Korean media recently dismissed South Korean predictions of reform as “nothing but a foolish and silly dream.”

Pyongyang reportedly is shifting control over economic enterprises back from the military to the party, but Kim reaffirmed his father’s “military first” policy. Jang may emerge as the dominant political figure but so far appears to want a more powerful rather than a more liberal North Korea.

Stability may be the more realistic objective for Washington in the short term. The United States and its allies should let the tragic situation in the North play out. Most important is to avoid conflict. Eventually the artificial reality constructed in Pyongyang will implode. Hopefully Korean reunification then will occur peacefully.

The problem of North Korea is likely to be long with us. There is no indication of either imminent reform or collapse. For the near future, the stability of Northeast Asia—home to China, Japan, Russia and South Korea—depends on the opaque maneuvering of a vampire elite in a criminal system. We are living in the “interesting times” promised by the famed Chinese curse.

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