



White House treads cautiously after North Korean leader's death

By Amie Parnes and Jeremy Herb - 12/19/11 06:26 PM ET

The White House took a cautious approach Monday following the announcement of the death of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Il, saying they would judge North Korea by its “actions” not by its “personalities” at the helm.

On the heels of Kim’s death, White House press secretary Jay Carney said it was “much too early” to make any judgments on potential nuclear action by the new regime or even the succession of Kim’s son, Kim Jong-Un.

“It’s premature to make assessments of the new leader,” Carney said, adding that the country is “in a period of national mourning.”

“It does make sense to give this process a little bit of time before we make judgments,” he continued. “We will judge the North Korean government the way we always have—by its actions.”



Carney said the current focus of the administration was the close coordination between U.S. allies and partners. The White House spokesman said the administration doesn’t have any “additional concerns beyond the ones we have long had with North Korea’s approach to nuclear issues.”

After meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba on Monday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the two leaders share a common interest in a “peaceful and stable” transition in North Korea and repeated a hope for improved relations with the communist country. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta also spoke with South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin on the phone Monday and reiterated the unwavering support from the U.S.

At the same time, administration officials—careful to not get into the business of speculating and predicting —signaled to South Korea’s leaders to remain calm but vigilant despite concerns that Kim Jong-Un may try and assert himself as a strong leader.

President Obama—who learned of the elder Kim’s death late Sunday night from White House chief of staff Bill Daley-- spoke with Lee Myung-bak, the President of South Korea early Monday morning, reaffirming the U.S.’s strong commitment to the stability of the Korea Peninsula and the security of the nation.

“They’re understandably nervous,” said an administration official, referring to South Korea. “It’s a new area. We don’t know what they’ll do.

“We’re all monitoring the situation because no one knows what will happen,” the official said. “Given the unpredictability, we are in close contact with our diplomatic partners and in doing so, it should be clear to North Korea that we’re watching.”

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who has written two books on Korea, said the White House is “primarily concerned that we’re going from a situation of relative stability –as messy as it was--to one where we just don’t know what the future holds.” Bandow said. “No one knows what to expect.

On Capitol Hill, members hailed the death of the North Korean leader as a positive step, while expressing caution at the resulting uncertainty.

“We’re entering a dangerous phase in which one tyrant may well be replaced by another,” said Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) “Uncertainty isn’t a good thing on the Korean Peninsula, where millions of troops from the South and the North face each other...the range of likely scenerios—to include accelerated nuclear testing—is deeply concerning.”

Rep. Howard Berman, (D-Calif.) the ranking member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee said even with a new leader at the helm, “it does not end the challenge the North poses for the region and the world.”

“North Korea’s nuclear weapons program remains a grave threat and a dangerous proliferation risk,” he said.

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) the chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, agreed. Ros-Lehtinen said it would be a mistake to continue with policy as usual by default.

“It is important that we gain a solid understanding of who is in control of the country, particularly its missile and nuclear capabilities and revisit our policies accordingly,” she said.

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