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Waiting and watching in North Korea

2011-12-20 16:35:48

The death of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il presents both dangers and opportunities for America. The dangers come from the instability in the North Korean regime, which with Cuba is the last of the old, hard-core communist regimes. Every other communist regime — China, Russia, Vietnam, etc. — has switched to some sort of capitalism, however imperfect. Capitalism produced prosperity. By contrast, socialism, especially in its virulent communist version, produced poverty and starvation.

North Korea also has performed two nuclear tests. According to the Federation of American scientists, it may have up to nine nuclear weapons, although no one knows the exact number, or if it actually possesses such weapons. The Pyongyang regime also possesses a significant chemical-weapons capability.

Although socialist regimes are supposed to elevate to power only the best to lead the “vanguard of the proletariat,” as Lenin put it, North Korea developed a nepotistic dynasty. In 1994, Kim succeeded his father, longtime dictator Kim Il-sung. Although the younger Kim was dubbed the “Dear Leader,” only his friends, cronies and some brainwashed North Koreans will mourn his demise.

In 1994, he had a chance to modernize North Korea. In 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen. Its arms patron, the Soviet Union, dissolved its own Communist Party in 1991. And neighbor and patron China had switched to a market economy in 1978. But Kim continued his father’s obsession with socialism, leading his country to continued impoverishment, even starvation. Yet Kim himself, according to Russian reports, had live lobsters flown to him during his trips to Russia and China.

By contrast, South Korea transformed itself from total poverty after the Korean War in 1953 into today’s economic powerhouse.

North Korea long has been a mystery to outsiders. That remains so today, with the heir apparent to the socialist dynasty being Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il’s third son and the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. The younger Kim reportedly is 27 or 28 years old, attended high school in Switzerland and is obsessed with the National Basketball Association. So he at least has some knowledge of the prosperity and freedom of non-communist countries.

But the new leader also faces challenges within the ruling regime, said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author of two books on Korea policy. “From the American standpoint, we should be prepared to talk, but shouldn’t expect to get anything out of it. There will be no agreement during the transition” on North Korea getting rid of its nuclear arsenal, because “there are low hopes of anything to come out of the generals.” The new leader — or someone else — first must solidify his position as the person in charge before anything meaningful can result.

But now is a good time, Bandow said, for the United States to “emphasize South Korea’s responsibility on policy. South Korea is well-equipped to deal with it.” Due to the vast growth of its capitalist economy, democratic South Korea today has twice the population and an incredible 40 times the economic power as North Korea. It also has access to top-level U.S. weapons, whereas the North still depends to a great extent on outdated Soviet-era weapons.

Bandow long has held that American troops, currently 28,500, gradually should be withdrawn from South Korea, allowing the country to defend itself. But he said the United States should wait to begin the withdrawal until the power transition in the North is complete. In the meantime, negotiations for the

withdrawal should continue with South Korea.

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