

Living with North Korea without Kim Jong Il: A South Korean Perspective

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It seems that Kim Jong Il, the man who held supreme power in North Korea for 37 years, was after all just a human being with a biologically limited life span. He died of a myocardial infarction brought on by overwork on December 17th, 2011, as announced by the North Korean government some 2 days later. The regime quickly proclaimed the dawn of the “Kim Jong Eun era” and moved to formalize and legitimize the new leadership in the wake of Kim Jong Il’s death. The new North Korean leadership headed by Kim Jong Eun has been steadily working to fill the power vacuum, proceeding smoothly through Kim Jong Il’s funeral on December 28th and the memorial service on the 29th, and naming Kim Jong Eun supreme commander on the 31st.

Moreover, the regime has acted swiftly in condemning the Lee Myung Bak administration’s prohibition on free condolence visits to North Korea and blocking out the external and internal voices calling for change. On December 30th the new leadership issued a declaration, in the name of the National Defense Committee, stating “We will refuse forever to engage with traitor Lee Myung Bak and his group” and the world “should not expect any changes from us.” Further, the New Year’s Joint Editorial issued on January 1st expressed outrage against “the acts

contrary to morality and against the nation committed by the group of traitors in South Korea neglecting the greatest national sorrow and hindering in every possible way the offering of condolence,” proclaiming that they would “implement the instructions of the Great General Kim Jong Il” and “follow to the end the road of independence, the road of Songun [military–first politics], and the road to socialism.”

Structure and Characteristics of the New Leadership

The state funeral for Kim Jong Il, held on December 28th, provided the first opportunity for South Korean analysts to assess the new leadership’s structure and characteristics. On that day, Kim Jong Il’s hearse was escorted by eight people including Kim Jong Eun himself, followed immediately by his uncle Jang Sung Taek, who is now the KWP’s chief of administration and vice chairman of the National Defense Committee. This indicated that Jang is now second-in-command. Others accompanying the hearse included Ri Young Ho (chief of General Staff of the Korean People’s Army and member of the Standing Committee of the KWP Politburo), Kim Young Chun (head of the People’s Armed Forces Ministry and vice chairman of the National Defense Committee), Kim Jong Gak (first vice director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA and KWP Politburo member), Woo Dong Cheuk (first vice director of the State Security Agency and member of the National Defense Committee), Kim Gi Nam (secretary of the Party’s Propaganda Department and KWP Politburo member), and Choi Tae Bok (chairman of the Supreme People’s Assembly and Party secretary for education). Other core figures in the Kim Jong Eun power structure who did not escort the car included Kim Kyung Hee (KPA general and member of the KWP Politburo), Ri Myeong Soo (head of the People’s Safety Agency), Kim Kyeong Ok (first vice director of the KWP’s Personnel Guidance Department), and Choi Yong Rim (prime minister in the Cabinet).

In sum, looking at the various faces that are most conspicuous in the core of the new leadership, it appears that the intention is to control the country via the Party with the primary objectives of maintaining the military–first system and preserving the regime. First of all, it is noteworthy that most of the key figures are military officers. A few civilian leaders, such as Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek, who have been given the military rank of four–star general but cannot truly be considered military figures.

The roles of the various members of the core leadership have been relatively clearly defined. Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek are the core figures in charge of the Party, while Ri Yong Ho and Kim Yong Chun seem to be in charge of the armed

forces, and Kim Jong Gak, Woo Dong Cheuk, Ri Myeong Soo, and Kim Kyeong Ok are tasked with enforcing the system and cracking down on disobedience. The KPA's General Political Bureau, with Kim Jong Gak at its head, is the organization responsible for monitoring military officers. The State Security Agency, run by Woo Dong Cheuk, is the central intelligence organ for investigating officials of the Party, military and government. Kim Ki Nam is to handle the task of establishing regime legitimacy, including organizing idolization of Kim Jong Eun. Choe Tae Bok is to act as a mentor to Kim Jong Eun on matters of foreign policy and science.

Jang Sung Taek, Kim Young Chun, and Woo Dong Cheuk all serve as either vice directors or members of the National Defense Committee, which is the highest organ of state power under the North Korean Constitution. It may seem only natural that the core figures of the new leadership should have a firm grip on the NDC. However, we should also bear in mind that most of the core leadership are affiliated with the KWP's Central Military Committee. Furthermore, recalling that Kim Jong Il never took over his own father's office as head of state, we should consider the possibility that Kim Jong Eun might never actually take over his father's position as NDC chairman. In light of these considerations, we can conjecture that the new leadership is hoping to control the country via the Party. The Central Military Committee is now headed by Kim Jong Eun and also includes Ri Young Ho, Kim Young Chun, Kim Jeong Gak, Woo Dong Cheuk, and Kim Kyeong Ok. In fact, Kim Jong Eun's status as successor was formalized via his appointment as vice director of the CMC in September 2010.

Another aspect worth noting is the role and status of the power couple Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek. As the aunt and uncle of the successor, they will remain constant and un-dismissible thanks to their status as close relations; furthermore, Jang Sung Taek's siblings and cousins were all powerful military officials and Jang effectively controls both the State Security and Peoples' Safety Agencies; it is difficult to compare this couple to other leading individuals. Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek can be considered the core of the core leadership group, and consequently they stand to wield the most influence over Kim Jong Eun. In light of this and the fact that Kim Jong Eun does not yet have detailed knowledge of how to run the country, the new leadership should be considered akin to a "collective advisor system" or a "collective regency system," composed of a core group of advisors surrounding Kim Jong Eun and headed by Jang Sung Taek and Kim Kyung Hee.

Outlook for Stability under the New Leadership

With Kim Jong Il's funeral out of the way, the attention of South Korea and the world naturally has turned to the question of how stable the new leadership will be. Will the Kim Jong Eun regime overcome its current difficulties and secure an uninhibited grip on the country, or will there be major changes in the leadership structure? If the latter, what sort of changes can we expect? To answer these questions we must first divide our analysis into short-term and long-term viewpoints.

For now, it seems most likely that during the mourning period the new leadership will be able to proceed unhindered with the work of institutionalizing and legitimizing the Kim Jong Eun regime. This is the predominant short-term outlook given by most South Korean experts. It is impossible to say definitively how long the mourning period will last, but it can be easily expected to continue until the "Day of the Sun" on April 15th (Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday), at which time the nation is set to celebrate the "first year of the new era of the strong and prosperous nation." Since the power transition occurred at an unexpected moment and the new leadership will be feeling tremendously uneasy about the state of the regime, the highest priority will be placed on regime continuity and stability. During this period the whole country will undergo a phase of competitive mourning led by the new leadership, and even if there are some pockets of dissent they will be overwhelmed by the mourning atmosphere. The leaders in the Party will also be rushing to institutionalize the Kim Jong Eun regime by naming him to the highest post in the KWP and will be keen to maintain harmony among the old and young generations, so they will likely speed up the generational shift in key posts of the Party, military and government. For the sake of legitimizing the Kim Jong Eun regime, an idolization campaign will be promoted and the young leader will attempt to amass more achievements. The new leadership is already pressing forward with the legitimization process, as revealed by the fact that Kim Jong Eun has already appeared on a postage stamp and been referred to by the titles "Great Leader" and "Hero of the Republic" during the funeral period.

Meanwhile, the process of consolidating the "Kim Dynasty" is progressing at a rapid pace, and this process appears likely to be led by the power couple Kim Kyung Hee and Jang Sung Taek. We must presume that the regime has already completed the task of subjugating or purging the factions who variously supported Kim Jong Il's half brother Kim Pyong Il (North Korea's ambassador to Poland), Kim Jong Eun's half brother Kim Jong Nam, or his full brother Kim Jong Cheol.

But considering that Kim Jong Il had four wives in his life, they will also need to dispose of the various other family branches not related to Kim Jong Eun's mother Ko Young Hee. At the same time, second-generation partisans aligned with Kim Jong Eun will be positioned in important posts.

The probability of North Korea launching a major provocation during the mourning period is not very high. In the wake of Kim Jong Il's passing the current North Korean regime is like a wounded animal that senses a threat and keeps itself tightly crouched; they do not have the leisure to try an armed provocation that might incur a strong reaction from the opposing party. The NDC's defiant December 30th declaration to "refuse forever to engage with traitor Lee Myung Bak" is representative of the complex interplay of the regime's efforts to get an edge on President Lee Myung Bak, their intent to influence the outcome of the 2012 South Korean elections, and their desire to block external pressure to embrace reform and opening. It also indicates a posture of "defensive bluffing" that is a reflection of the regime's current sense of crisis.

However, after the mourning period ends, various stabilizing and destabilizing factors can be expected to emerge, and thus the level of uncertainty surrounding the Kim Jong Eun regime will increase. Theoretically, we can envision a variety of scenarios: the regime may overcome its current problems and firmly establish Kim Jong Eun as the third generation monarch of "Kim Il Sung's Korea"; the collective advisor system may continue to operate; power struggles may grow more prominent; a true collective leadership system may emerge to unite the various warring factions; a confrontation may erupt between Pyongyang and the provinces; the pro-status quo and pro-reform factions may engage each other in a test of strength; clashes may break out within the military; public unrest may result in disturbances; etc. Whichever scenario plays out in the end will depend on the dynamics of the relationship between the destabilizing and stabilizing factors.

Destabilizing factors include Kim Jong Eun's insufficient leadership capacity, the economic problems, the presence of the famine generation, the potential failure of the idolization effort, inequalities between Pyongyang and other regions, the diluted effectiveness of having to rule by the previous leader's parting injunctions, etc. At the tender age of 29, with less than three years of training as successor, and lacking the "3Ps" (political power base, policy capability, and personality) which a successor usually requires to secure his power base in a dictatorship, Kim Jong Eun must nevertheless resolve the economic problems and pull off a series

of successful events to mark the first year of the “great strong and prosperous nation” era. Recalling the precedent of the “World Festival of Youth and Students” held in Pyongyang in 1989, which cost the regime some 2 billion dollars and started a 20-year economic decline, we can anticipate even deeper economic troubles in the latter half of 2012 after the country’s resources have been depleted by the various political festivals earlier in the year. The North Korean economy can be subdivided into three sectors: the government-guided planned economy or “Cabinet economy,” the *suryong* economy (which incorporates both defense spending and the Party’s expenses), and the illegal but strong market economy. The Cabinet economy has long since collapsed, while the *suryong* economy is complex and afflicted by corruption. The “famine generation” refers to those who lived in areas outside of Pyongyang and experienced starvation in the mid-1990s when the state distribution system collapsed. This group is relatively more likely to feel a strong sense of resistance against the government. Those who had stockpiled considerable savings from their earnings in the market economy and had those savings stripped away by the 2009 currency reform are particularly hostile toward the central government. The project to construct 100,000 new housing units in Pyongyang is sapping resources from the provinces and further exacerbating provincial residents’ sense of inequality. We will have to wait and see whether Kim Jong Eun can exhibit sufficient leadership capacity to overcome these problems.

Stabilizing factors include Kim Jong Eun’s inheritance of the “revolutionary bloodline,” the fact that China, North Korea’s most powerful backer, has directly given its support for the Kim Jong Eun regime, the fact that before his death Kim Jong Il removed many of the individuals who could pose as significant obstacles to the succession, the absence of any real opposition group or infrastructure in either the military or the civilian population as a result of years of repressive government, and the symbiotic relationship between Kim Jong Eun and the military and privileged classes. Among these, the support of the military and privileged classes will be a decisive factor. These people enjoyed special privileges while hailing Kim Jong Il as a “peerless leader and loving father,” and the easiest way for them to continue to maintain their privileged status is to put Kim Jong Eun in the seat of power and help maintain the existing structures and organizations. At present the stabilizing factors appear stronger than the destabilizing ones, and therefore predictions that the regime will stabilize have greater persuasive force.

Outlook for the New Leadership's Policy Tone

Assuming the new leadership centered around Kim Jong Eun is able to secure its power base, what sort of foreign policy are they most likely to adopt? Looking at the big picture, they basically have two choices: the “good” choice of setting aside their nuclear weapons and embracing reform and opening, or the “bad” choice which follows the example of their predecessors and sacrifices everything for the sake of regime survival, i.e. continuing with the repressive military–first political system propped up by nuclear weapons. At present, there is little to indicate that they will make the “good” choice.

Whether the new leadership accepts reform and opening or not will be determined largely by two groups of variables. First of all, looking at the internal variables, there is no apparent trend indicative of a movement toward reform and opening. We should note that it is the “pro–status quo” forces, comprised of the military and privileged classes, who stand to lose the most through reform and opening, and they form the core support base of the Kim Jong Eun regime. At the memorial service held on December 29th in Kim Il Sung Square, Kim Young Nam delivered a memorial speech which mentioned the phrase “military–first” 22 times; then, the NDC statement issued on December 30th included the message, “expect no change from us.” For the pro–status quo forces, Kim Jong Il was “a great general sent from heaven who transformed Korea into a powerful nuclear–equipped country that cannot be shaken by any enemy,” and nuclear weapons are his ultimate legacy. The more threatened the new leadership feels, the more tightly they will cling to their nuclear weapons, and within the next year it is quite possible that they may conduct a third nuclear test as a way of forestalling internal and external threats.

A second group of variables will come from outside. The most decisive factor among them will be the influence of China. However, the outlook in this area is also gloomy. Despite serious incidents in the past two years, such as the second nuclear test and the attacks on the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island, China has focused on strengthening its alliance with North Korea. This period saw prominent visits to Pyongyang by a number of Chinese leaders including Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (2009.10), CCP Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Guo Boshiong (2010.10.23), and Defense Minister Liang Guanglie (2009.10.22), along with consecutive visits to China by Kim Jong Il (2010.5, 2010.8, 2011.5), a port call by a flotilla of Chinese ships at Wonsan (2011.8), and Vice Premier Xi Jinping's provocative statement that the Korean War was about

“resisting aggression” against North Korea (2010.10). During this period trade between China and North Korea doubled. Shortly after Kim Jong Il’s death was announced, all members of China’s highest leadership visited the North Korean embassy in Beijing to express their condolences, and no sooner was Kim Jong Eun anointed supreme commander than China sent a congratulatory message. China’s moves to strengthen its alliance with North Korea – essentially abetting its continued development of nuclear weapons and siding with it through the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong provocations – reflect its continuing focus on the China–US confrontation. Given the present circumstances, the odds of China applying forceful pressure upon the North to embrace reform and opening are slim at best.

Of course, there are some variables which are conducive to reform and opening. Many have pointed out that a policy of reform and opening is the unavoidable course if the North is to raise its people out of poverty. Also, some analysts point to the fact that Kim Jong Eun is a Swiss-educated member of the “digital generation” and predict that he will exhibit reform-minded tendencies. However, these variables will probably be easily overwhelmed by the opposing structural and environmental factors. North Korea is effectively a “monarchist state” in which the people neither choose their government nor influence its policies, and thus the regime will resist reform and opening as long as it is deemed harmful to regime stability. Furthermore, even if Kim Jong Eun does possess reformist tendencies, this will likely be overwhelmed by the strong defensive character of the new leadership.

In sum, looking at the characteristics of the support group surrounding Kim Jong Eun, the recent moves of China, and the statements issued by the new leadership through the funeral period, we can assess that the new leadership is moving toward a policy stance of “regime preservation” and away from “reform and opening.” In foreign policy, they will work to maintain their traditional strategic ties with China, while seeking ways to improve relations with the US for tactical purposes. While enjoying political support and economic cooperation from China, they will continue to adhere to their current system and nuclear programs. They will pursue a return to the Six Party Talks as a way of gaining immediate aid from the US while striving to dilute criticism on the nuclear issue.

The 2012 Joint New Year’s Editorial shows clearly the new leadership’s intention to escape its current crisis and secure the Kim Jong Eun system through a policy of regime preservation. The editorial acknowledges that “the food problem is a burning issue in building a thriving country,” and stresses plans to strengthen

various aspects of the civilian economy such as agriculture, basic industries, electricity generation, railway transport, and fertilizer production. Yet the phrase “great strong and prosperous nation” (kang seong dae guk), which was mentioned 19 times in the 2011 New Year’s editorial, only occurred 5 times in this year’s version and was replaced in other places by the terms “strong and prosperous nation” (kang seong guk ga) or “strong and prosperous rehabilitation” (kang seong bu heung). This seems to reflect an acknowledgement of the real economic conditions and an effort to water down the expression accordingly. Furthermore, the editorial states that “The Korean People’s Army is the pillar and main force of the Songun revolution and the vanguard in the building of a thriving nation,” and further urges, “Let us defend with our very lives the Party Central Committee headed by the dear respected Comrade Kim Jong Un!” Also, the editorial urges organizations like the Youth League and the Women’s League lead by example in construction efforts, kindly explaining that “To improve the appearance of Pyongyang is an important project to greet in grand style the centenary of the birth of President Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il’s earnest behest.” All of these phrases are indicative of the will of the new leadership, in its urgency to solidify the regime’s foundation, to reaffirm the loyalty of all major organizations from the military on down and prevent destabilizing factors from taking root.

While it is unsurprising that the new leadership in North Korea is composed of change-resistant forces, the fact that this group has voiced a clear rejection of change does not necessarily preclude the possibility that change may occur nonetheless. Nor does it mean that we should abandon our efforts to guide North Korea toward the “good choice.” No matter how one chooses to look at it, Kim Jong Il’s sudden departure has put North Korea at a crossroads. Where water flows down an incline, one may simply wait and see which way it will go, or one may dig a ditch to make it flow in the desired direction.

Tasks for South Korea

The death of Kim Jong Il may be either a boon or a bane for the Korean people. At the present time, what the ROK government needs most is the capacity to manage the various short- and long-term policy goals of its North Korea policy: improved government-to-government inter-Korean relations, changes in North Korea, national security, preparation for unification, and overcoming the South-South conflict within South Korea. As there is some contradiction among these tasks, government policy should not focus exclusively on any one at the expense of the others. Thus it is important for the ROK government to exhibit

“balance and harmony” in pursuing its various objectives.

Improving inter-Korean relations is an urgent task that has been placed before the ROK government. Previously, under the “Principled North Korea Policy,” the Lee Myung Bak administration demanded that the North fulfill a number of basic preconditions for exchange and cooperation, such as displaying sincerity in working to resolve the nuclear issue, guaranteeing the safety of South Korean citizens who stay in or visit North Korea, following international procedures in inter-Korean trade, improving the transparency of aid distribution, and apologizing for the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong attacks. But with the death of Kim Jong Il, the man ultimately responsible for those provocations, and with North Korea facing a crossroads, the South Korean government also needs to show greater flexibility and work harder to improve relations, tactfully ignoring whatever foul diatribes may spew forth from the new leadership. If North Korea responds sincerely, the logical next step would be for South Korea to show a disproportionate amount of tolerance and magnanimity.

In the same vein, it would be worthwhile at this time to show a more positive stance toward reopening Mt. Keumgang tourism and reconvening the Six Party Talks. Previously the South Korean demands related to reopening Mt. Keumgang tourism included a joint investigation, an apology for the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong attacks, and a guarantee of the safety of South Korean tourists. At this time, we can consider removing all of these demands except for the safety guarantee and try to reopen negotiations. It would be worthwhile to lighten our stance on the Six Party Talks as well. As long as the new North Korean leadership considers nuclear weapons to be the ultimate tool of regime preservation, complete denuclearization will only be possible through regime change. At any rate, the Six Party Talks are not the mechanism to fundamentally resolve the nuclear issue. In that case, we might as well adopt a flexible stance toward the Talks, with the basic attitude of “it’s better to have them than not have them.” The Talks might at least help resume IAEA inspections and freeze the uranium enrichment facility, and that much would be better than nothing.

However, in the longer-term, we must not lose sight of the more important goal of inducing change in North Korea. Numerous North Korean problems, including nuclear weapons, human rights abuses, and poverty, all stem from the nation’s socio-political system. If North Korea transforms into a nation that values its own peoples’ welfare and quality of life, one that observes the principles of human rights and sovereignty vested in the people, the nuclear problem will go away by

itself and the military provocations will also cease. Under those circumstances North Korea will naturally choose to lay down the nuclear weapons which have exacerbated its isolation and impoverished its people, even if no one forces it to do so. It is only through such change that we can establish a lasting peace based on mutual respect and reciprocity, as opposed to the sort of temporary peace that is achieved by merely placating the regime.

Thus, change in North Korea forms the foundation of our government's goal of peaceful unification. South Korea's goal is peaceful unification through mutual consent following North Korea's change in a positive direction; unification through absorption following North Korea's collapse is not our policy goal, nor would it be welcomed. For this purpose, any change that we seek to promote in the North must allow sufficient time and space for the North Korean leadership class to safely adjust. As long as North Korea resists such change and maintains its inhumane system, this kind of unification is impossible.

The power vacuum left by Kim Jong Il has also created new security concerns. Although most experts predict that the Kim Jong Eun regime will stabilize, at least in theoretical terms the North Korean regime remains as opaque and uncertain as ever. The destabilizing factors may not be immediately felt, but there is no guarantee that instability will not break out in the future. It is always possible that North Korea may attempt to manufacture external tension in order to conquer its internal uncertainty. We also cannot exclude the possibility that North Korea may implode regardless of whether we wish it to or not. National security means preparing against all possibilities, and this is the basic posture our military must take at this time. A solid security posture is one that does not hope for war but that builds a foundation for lasting inter-Korean cooperation and unification by removing the threat of military clashes.

China's behavior in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death has presented a serious concern for South Korea. China has clearly shown that it intends to continue to "defend" the North Korean regime, in spite of the latter's disregard for human rights, military provocations against the South, and nuclear tests. In doing so, China has reaffirmed that despite its massive economic partnership with South Korea, which has grown to a total annual trade volume of \$250 billion and personnel exchanges involving some 7 million people per year, political and military relations between the two countries are a still far cry from the level of economic relations. Since China's understanding and support will be essential in order to achieve unification, a large-scale unification diplomacy effort toward China should

be another key task for us. Despite vibrant trade and personnel exchanges, the ROK–China relationship faces many challenges from global factors such as increasingly vehement rivalry between the US and China and regional factors such as North Korea. Our government needs to wake up to the seriousness of this situation and formulate a long-term strategy.

There is also the daunting problem of how to guard against North Korea's attempts to manipulate the South Korean elections and encourage South–South conflict. South–South conflict breaks out in South Korea over every major North Korea–related issue and seriously weakens our influence on the North. Unlike East Germany, which maintained a consistent “Ostpolitik” approach even in times of power transfer between political parties, in South Korea conflict over our North Korea policy has long since moved beyond the scope of mere “internal differences of opinion.” In these circumstances North Korea does listen carefully to South Korea, and it has an even greater motivation to interfere in our political affairs. In South–South conflict, the two sides refer to each other by such epithets as “the pro-war faction” and “the pro-North faction.” We have all heard the classic argument that “Tensions help to unite the conservative factions, so there will be no provocations just before an election.” But in the present era, when North Korea wields a variety of asymmetric threats from nuclear weapons on down, provocations are a way of inciting fear and swaying South Korean public opinion in the direction the North desires. North Korea's New Year's Joint Editorial repeatedly stressed that “All the Korean people in the North, South and abroad should unite closely under the banners of the June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration.” This can be considered an indication that North Korea intends to interfere in the South Korean election and encourage South–South conflict, although it is difficult to foresee what form this interference might take in advance of the 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections.

Our tasks and objectives in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death are numerous, and managing contradictory goals is always a tricky problem. If we push for change, for example, Pyongyang will resist and inter-governmental relations will deteriorate, thus exacerbating tensions. On the other hand, if we ignore the issues of human rights and transparency in aid distribution in order to improve government-to-government relations, we might as well forget about changing North Korea and give up on our dream of unification. This means that for South Korea “peaceful management of division” and “unification” are mutually conflicting goals, and we cannot pursue one without sacrificing the other. Similarly, while “alliance with the United States” and “non-hostile friendly relations with China”

are the two paramount goals for South Korea's survival, prosperity and unification, we can hardly strengthen one without hurting the other. Therefore, the issue of how to balance and harmonize these competing goals will remain a most challenging task for the nation. Alas, it is easy to speak of "balance and harmony," but it is much harder to put it into practice.

Our Nation's Stance

Since Kim Jong Il's death, the Korean media has generated a great deal of speculation on the prospects and future implications for North Korea. Some political scientists and North Korea experts have discussed this topic on nearly every TV channel, and the ensuing discourse has proceeded in a particular direction. Confidently predicting that the Kim Jong Eun regime will stabilize, these experts have uniformly asserted that "The major cause for the strained inter-Korean relationship over the past several years has been the wrong-headed policy of the Lee Myung Bak government, and therefore we should shift to a conciliatory policy toward the North." However, such irresponsible logic encourages the public to embrace an over-simplified and short-sighted way of thinking in the name of "maintaining peaceful division through improvement of inter-governmental relations."

In the current ongoing period, summarized as "the post-Kim Jong Il transition to the Kim Jong Eun era," our task is not a simple matter of "fence-mending in inter-governmental relations." This would imply a willful ignorance of the many issues left unresolved in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death, such as democratization, improvement of North Korean human rights, South Korean national security, unification of the Korean peninsula, and ROK-China relations. By remaining indulgent toward North Korea's atrocities and directing the blame only toward our own government, we would only be hurting ourselves and relinquishing the initiative in future inter-Korean relations. We would also be turning a blind eye to the pain of the North Korean people who suffer under a brutally coercive regime, and trampling on the hopes of the many displaced people and defectors who yearn for unification. If the Korean people succumb to the oversimplified logic promoted in certain quarters, i.e. the belief that "If we just do what North Korea wants, inter-Korean relations will improve and tensions will be reduced," in the future our efforts to improve North Korean human rights and prepare for unification will lose legitimacy, and South Korea will devolve into a short-sighted nation of people with no thought for the unstable situation around them or the importance of preparing for unification.

We, the Korean people, should exercise discernment and wisdom before casting our lot with “post-Kim Jong Il North Korea.” We should keep a far-sighted perspective, completely conscious of our various policy goals toward the North, keeping in mind that improving inter-governmental relations is just one of our many goals. It is also important to remember that none of the existing scenarios related to the future of North Korea are definitive, though some appear more likely than others. Of the thousands of Russia experts in the US in 1991, none of them definitively predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union at that time. If we are wise, we should value the principle of preparing for every possibility, instead of hanging our hopes and fears on the words of a few political scientists who have been pressed to make predictions based on a mere thimbleful of knowledge. If we are wise, we should understand that some of our goals may be at odds with each other and that some goals may seem more important than others according to the time period and conditions. As a wise nation, we should also learn to read between the lines and discern the unstated goals of our government, and we should keep a stiff upper lip even in uncomfortable situations, such as when our government is compelled to shake blood-stained hands in the name of showing flexibility. Some people may question the distinction between displaying flexibility and discarding our principles. Indeed, it can sometimes be unclear where to draw the line in this area. But it is not so ambiguous that we should abandon all of our earnest efforts. As long as the fundamental goals of democracy, human rights, security, and unification are alive in the hearts of the decision-maker, even large concessions can be considered in the name of flexibility.

Political scientists, who play a leading role in generating and expanding the national discourse during critical periods such as this, should feel a great sense of responsibility as well. If they are truly considerate of the feelings of the North Korean people who are plagued by destitution and human rights violations, the lamentations of defectors who long to return to their homes and reunite with their families, and the suppressed sorrow of the mothers of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyong victims who could not even grieve properly for their lost sons, they should begin their arguments first and foremost by urging the North to change its stripes. Improving inter-governmental relations is also important, but they should explain clearly why changes in the North are more imperative and urgent. We should speak with one voice to the North in demanding that they “return the daughters of Tongyeong and make a fresh start.” More importantly, we should urge the North to “discard nuclear weapons and join us in working toward mutual prosperity and unification.” These should be the arguments that our political scientists emphasize as the post-Kim Jong Il era dawns in the new year of 2012.