

Hedging Opportunities and Crises against Pyongyang's Hereditary Succession: A Chinese Perspective

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Abstract

Beijing passively supports Kim Jong-il's succession plan. This support has been structured into its DPRK policy centered on the principles of crisis aversion, even though it realizes the high costs of this policy: huge economic aid to an unpredictable neighbor and the negative regional response. This status quo-based policy symbolizes not only Beijing's lingering "buffer zone" mentality but also its difficulty in finding any feasible substitute. Therefore, Beijing is not in a position to visibly alter its DPRK policy any time soon. Yet China may have revised the bottom line of its policy vis-à-vis the North in the wake of the 2010 adventurism that dragged China into confrontation against its will. This would be a hedging strategy, setting pre-determined plans to preempt any precarious situation on the peninsula and cooperating with regional countries regarding sudden developments in Pyongyang. At the same time it would hedge against the possibility of a war for regime change on the ground. Beijing's general view of the prospects for the succession is relatively optimistic, since Kim Jong-il is making detailed plans for the transfer of power and he may still have a number of years to live, granting the extra time which is crucial for consolidating the heir's power.

Key Words: Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, succession, Chinese DPRK policy, U.S.-ROK alliance

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2010 witnessed several significant events in the Korean Peninsula which can be organized into two categories. The first was the armed clashes between the two Koreas, namely, the sinking of South Korea's corvette Cheonan in March and North Korea's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23. The second was the anointment of Kim Jong-il's third son Kim Jong-un as the next leader of the Democratic People Republic of Korea (DPRK) in September. In a way, the two military events somewhat diverted international attention away from Pyongyang's planned succession, as they almost brought the peninsula to the point of war. Undeniably, the DPRK's adventurism may have helped Seoul and its allies/partners to generate an important consensus on a coordinated response to any future provocations from the North. This is a strategic feat in itself, contributing to the emerging trend of bipolar alignment in East Asia in which Washington leads a collective hedging endeavor against China's rise and Beijing adopts various counter-measures in response. However, given that no major player involved in the Korean conflict desires an uncontrollable escalation of tension, Pyongyang's brinkmanship in 2010 was likely a specific bellicose response to specific challenges, not representing a fundamental policy change toward confrontation, and thus it can be managed with intervention by other big powers, especially China.¹ In comparison Kim Jong-un's ascendance represents the biggest political gamble in Kim Jong-il's life as it is an unpredictable process which will have a long-lasting impact on the overall security situation on the peninsula.

Many questions arise in regard to Kim Jong-un's anointment and its consequences. Is this the beginning of the end of Pyongyang's succession impasse, or the beginning of a fiercer power struggle among the North's

¹-Professor Shen Dingli of Fudan University, "Ending the Tension," www.china.org, November 27, 2010.

elites? Each cycle of succession in the dictatorial regime entails a process of power redistribution that is zero-sum by nature. Can the DPRK's political system, which is already greatly weakened by its internal and external crises, absorb such a tremendous impact? The lead-up to the final takeover is also the most vulnerable period of any power transition; will the DPRK project a reconciliatory stance in order to ease tensions with its foes, or will it seek to shift the burden of its domestic crisis onto its neighbors through further provocations? Any scenario is possible. This is why all the involved parties are preparing for the worst in the years to come.

As far as Beijing is concerned, its basic position on Kim Jong-un's succession is embedded in its central Korean policy of crisis aversion. Logically this dictates that Beijing must follow a policy of assisting in the DPRK regime's survival. Under the circumstances Beijing does not have any choice but to prop up Kim Jong-un, who will be the key to the regime's survival once he is in power. Therefore, considering how Beijing remained "neutral" in the two armed clashes on the peninsula in 2010, it seems determined to exercise a high level of strategic tolerance toward a regime that violates almost all of its vital interests and offers nothing except its dubious value as a buffer zone.² Beijing's rationale for "neutrality" is sensible, intended to somewhat rectify the heavily tilted balance against the DPRK on the peninsula for the sake of retaining the status quo. It assessed that "neutrality" was a bad choice, as this could place China in an odd position in major power interactions in East Asia. Yet other choices may have worse consequences if they cause sudden unwanted upheavals in the region.³ China was simply not ready for that. This paper argues that

²- See You Ji, "Dealing with the "North Korea Dilemma": China's Strategic Choices," *Working Paper* 229, RSIS (Nanyang Technological University, 2011).

³- Shotaro Yachi analyzes the rationale for this "neutrality" as a way to prevent further escalation of North/South tension, support peninsular stability and ensure the Pyongyang

China's swift endorsement of Kim Jong-un as successor was both an externally-imposed necessity pertinent to its status quo emphasis and a kind of active pragmatism drawing a sharp line between its non-committal attitudes toward the Kim Il-sung/Kim Jong-il cycle of succession 37 years ago and the present day.⁴ However, Beijing has also left itself vulnerable to being hijacked by uncertainties during the Kim Jong-il/Kim Jong-un succession.

The Politics of Succession in Socialist States and North Korea

Ensuring the orderly transfer of power is an unresolved issue in all socialist states. However, North Korea is the only such country employing a heredity succession, in which the top leader selects one of his family members to be his successor. If essential conditions are met, family heredity may have certain advantages over the practice of negotiated transfer of top power, the normal method of succession in other socialist states. One advantage is greater predictability on the part of the successor, who can preempt other power aspirants. China and Vietnam, for instance, face grave transitional voids during succession: the tradition of personal nomination by the Party boss has been discarded for its generally perceived lack of legitimacy, but the practice of open elections as a way of choosing the top leader is still viewed as a threat to regime stability. In the meantime, negotiations may exacerbate factional infighting and animosity among elites, with lasting detrimental effects on leadership

regime's survival. "ROK Diplomacy: Navigating Uncharted Waters: The Historic Significance of the Cheonan Incident for ROK Foreign Policy," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2010, p. 78.

⁴- On October 2, 2010, Hu Jintao received KWP Politburo member Choe Tae Bok in Beijing and expressed his sincere hopes of cooperating with North Korea's *new leadership* after the KWP's September conference. *New China News Agency*, October 3, 2010.

unity.⁵ After all, the negotiated selection of a successor is still a product of one-man rule under the guidance of a group of “kingmakers.” It differs from hereditary succession in that the pool of candidates is larger and the agreed heir is more representative of the vested interests of the Party.

Yet compared with hereditary succession, negotiated succession is halfway to an institutionalized power transfer and thus a sign of political progress. It abolishes life-time tenure in office, seeks wider organizational consultation, and thus achieves greater popular endorsement from Party members.⁶ In the meantime certain norms and commonly accepted game rules are created and codified to regulate elite competition for the top post. If these are followed in good faith, an orderly power transfer can be sustained, as shown by the relatively smooth successions in Vietnam since 1969 and in China since 1989.

North Korea’s family-based succession system represents its own unique way of tackling the factional infighting and elite animosity that are inevitable in the succession politics of authoritarian states. Heredity sets the limits of rivalry at the apex of power within a small scope of family members and thus makes it easier to manage this struggle under the control of the patriarch and through various mechanisms such as exile or marginalization. Heredity also creates better transparency once the choice is made. As mentioned earlier, if certain conditions are met - such as consensus among power elites around the top family, support from powerful institutions such as the military, and an ample period of time for

⁵- This is reflected by the difficult transfer of power in China under Mao and Deng when vicious power struggles almost destroyed CCP rule. Lowell Dittmer, “Leadership Change and Chinese Political Development,” in Yun-han Chu & others (eds.), *The New Chinese Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities after the 16th Party Congress* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶- This is not easy but is achievable, as shown by Hu Jintao’s leadership over the last eight years. You Ji, “The 17th Party Congress and the CCP’s Changing Elite Politics,” in Dali Yang and Zhao Litao (eds.), *China’s Reform at 30* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2009), pp. 55-92.

the heir to consolidate power - dynastic heredity may not necessarily be crisis-ridden or lead to regime collapse. Kim Jong-il himself is a fine example of this argument.

There are other special features to a family succession. Hereditary succession can help prevent the emergence of policy dichotomies between the incumbent leader and his successor. Kim Jong-un's legitimacy is built upon his father's blessing, as his father's legitimacy was built upon his grandfather's. Thus he is unlikely to reform his father's dynasty once he is at the top. In contrast almost all successors in communist states have tried to alter the policies of their predecessors to build up their own legitimacy.⁷ In North Korea this continuation of the father's political line is linked to regime survival in the short-run, as it is the basis of shared vested interests among the elites. Yet at the same time it causes the flaws in the father's policy and in the North's political system to become entrenched. In the long run, the lack of incentives or driving forces for change can simply worsen the regime's predicament, leading to its eventual collapse.

Kim Jong-un's anointment signals the beginning of the end of the DPRK's transfer of top power, but it is just a beginning, not the end. As mentioned earlier, unless certain necessary conditions are met - such as general consensus among the elites, support from powerful institutions like the KPA, and sufficient time for consolidation of the heir's power - the nomination alone cannot resolve the succession impasse in Pyongyang. Kim Jong-il has already been working on borrowed time to arrange Kim Jong-un's takeover,⁸ and there are still a lot of uncertainties ahead for the

⁷-The best examples are Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping, who undid Soviet and Chinese communism and made Russia and China what they are today.

⁸-According to some Chinese sources Kim has been on dialysis for five years. In medical terms, normally people can last for seven or eight years under such conditions. *Debate on Current Affairs*, Phoenix TV, October 11, 2010.

designated heir. It will be interesting to see if he can have the last laugh.

Divide-and-Rule and Dynastic Heredity

Yet the biggest challenge to Kim Jong-un is the fragmented ruling clique itself, the product of the traditional divide-and-rule tactics employed by the Kim family to ensure its firm hold on power.

Divide-and-Rule: The Built-in Mechanism of Dictatorship

When Deng Xiaoping accompanied Kim Il-sung on a journey by train to his hometown of Sichuan in September 1982, along the way Kim explained to Deng why he had to arrange for his son to take the helm.⁹ This was a belated answer to a question that Mao Zedong had raised about Kim Jong-il's hereditary succession plan seven years earlier in Beijing.¹⁰ Kim told Deng that the senior cadres of his own generation were not united. None of them had sufficient legitimacy or authority to rule the DPRK effectively due to their mutual lack of respect. He stated that if he passed power on to one of his peers, there would inevitably be a power rivalry among them. But all of them pledged to support his plan for Kim Jong-il to be the next leader. Their loyalty to the family was the precondition for the North's political stability after his departure.¹¹ Unlike Mao, Deng gave his immediate consent, which pleased Kim Il-sung so much that he promised Deng that he would arrange for his son to visit

⁹- This account was related by Zhang Tingyan (Deng's interpreter and China's first ambassador to South Korea), <http://gb.cri.cn>, October 5, 2010.

¹⁰- Interview with a former senior Chinese diplomat to Pyongyang in Beijing in January 2000; see also You Ji, "China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 28, 2001, pp. 34-57.

¹¹- You Ji, 2001.

China to study Chinese reforms once a year. Following Deng's suggestion the younger Kim went to Shenzhen for a field study of China's reform experiment in June 1983. However, after that he did not make another trip until 2000. In fact, he criticized every major Chinese reform as a betrayal of socialism.¹²

Kim Il-sung's revelation to Deng conveyed subtle insight into the correlation between Kim family politics and regime survival in North Korea. Theoretically, heredity is probably the only viable way for the DPRK to manage a political succession. This is not only because the Kim family is central to North Korea's political system but, more fundamentally, it is rooted in Kim's divide-and-rule method of maintaining family authority which makes any institutionalized transfer of power impossible. Nor does it allow much room for collective leadership at the apex of power. From day one of the DPRK's existence, Kim Il-sung consolidated power by soliciting support from the pro-Beijing faction in order to undermine the pro-USSR faction. Once he attained supremacy he purged the pro-Beijing faction. Throughout much of the 1960s he played Beijing against Moscow and vice versa.¹³ Only by fragmenting the power elites was he able to place himself above all of the party and military factions. The divide-and-rule system has proven to be an effective method of internal checks-and-balances against any potential challengers.

Institutionally, the two Kims purposely created powerful agencies which clamp down on each other. The heads of these agencies watch each other on behalf of their institutional missions. Interpersonal animosity is

¹²- The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up a special group to prepare for Kim Jong-il's "study tour," but it never had the chance to welcome Kim. Interview with a member of the group in Beijing in December 1999.

¹³- See Jonathan Pollack's new book *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*, Adephe series 418-419, Institute of International and Strategic Studies (London: Routledge, 2011); Yang Jun & Wang Qiubin, *On the Relationship between China and the Koreas* (Beijing: Shehuikexue chubanshe, 2006), p. 240.

a natural outcome of such a ruling method. One typical example was the establishment of the Department of Party Organization and Guidance (DPOG), the so-called “Party within the Party,” charged with appointing and monitoring all senior cadres in both the civilian and military sectors. Together with the Party’s Administrative Department they form the core apparatus by which Kim Jong-il exercises daily control over DPRK politics.

When Kim Junior assumed full control of the DPRK in 1994, he became even more addicted to this control mechanism. He first promoted a number of young lieutenants to key positions in order to weaken the influence of the leaders of his father’s generation.¹⁴ He continued to head the DPOG and made it his personal spy and control agency. Within the Korean People’s Army (KPA), he ordered the three key branches - the General Staff, General Political Bureau and the Political Security Department - to report to him directly rather than through the National Defense Commission (NDC) and the Party’s Military Department. Each of these three also checks and balances the others from within. At the same time, Kim elevated his personal guard agency to a status parallel to the regular command of the KPA, thus splitting the integrated command chain of the military.¹⁵

By now, the divide-and-rule mechanism is no longer employed as a matter of personal choice by Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un; it has become a strategic necessity for his family to maintain dynastic control over the whole political system. The mechanism has been embedded in the operations of this system and has even become an inseparable part of the system under the Kim family. This further exacerbates an already tight

¹⁴ - Kim Chong-min, “Kim Jong-il’s New Power Structure and Its Real Power Holders,” *Seoul Pukhan*, October 1998.

¹⁵ - Ken Gause, *North Korea Civil-Military Trends: Military-first Politics to a Point* (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006).

hierarchical ruling structure based on family ties which can be traced back to the 1930s. As an outcome, below Kim Jong-il and outside his family there is no generally accepted figure upon whom to confer power. This has been a deliberate systematic design reinforced by organizational procedures, military reinforcement and ideological indoctrination.¹⁶ In a way Kim Jong-nam's remarks on his father's opposition to the hereditary succession may have revealed the true feelings of Kim Jong-il, who knows only too well how tough it is to run the DPRK's affairs. As a father, committing another family member to this tough job must be a difficult choice, but he has no alternative; such are the dictates of the system.¹⁷

Divide-and-Rule as a Major Challenge for the Successor

The DPRK's two succession cases have vividly demonstrated this power flow and transfer process. Kim Jong-il's relatively smooth reign since 1994 has testified why family heredity is crucial to achieving regime security through the cruel suppression of internal challenges. It is still a mystery how Kim Jong-il eventually triumphed against his rivals at the time, but his father's support apparently cleared all the obstacles to his coronation.¹⁸ His brother was then effectively exiled to East Europe. This reflects the cruelty of family succession. A situation where multiple family members compete for the top job can evolve into a structure with multiple centers of power, undermining the vital interests of the dynasty. Inevitably all but one must leave. Looking back on the history of the DPRK's dynastic succession, the transfer of power has been relatively

¹⁶ - Samuel Kim, *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era* (Palgrave, 2001).

¹⁷ - For Kim Jong-nam's remarks, see *The Guardian*, January 28, 2011.

¹⁸ - Kim Jong-il's ability to foster support from the military and his father's core followers was a key contributing factor in his consolidation of power. See Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, *North Korea through the Looking Glass* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000), pp. 85-90.

bloodless, although for the losers it was cruel enough. For the rulers, family ties are part of court politics and are oriented toward eventual succession. In working toward this goal, there is nothing that cannot be sacrificed.

Today as the history repeats itself once again, it is questionable if Kim Jong-il can be so lucky a second time. The conditions his father created for his takeover 37 years ago do not exist for his son. Compared with Kim Il-sung in 1974, Kim Jong-Il's health now is fragile, and by the mid-1970s he already had great autonomy in the running of state affairs.¹⁹ By 1993 Kim Junior was made chair of the NDC. With the top leader's blessing, two decades are long enough for any heir to consolidate his power.²⁰ It is apparent that Kim Jong-un does not have 20 years to achieve power consolidation. His father's tutelage may end abruptly. And it is too risky to entrust the Young General with major state affairs just months after his introduction as heir. The Confucian aspects of *Juche* philosophy may accord a level of automatic legitimacy to the successor.²¹ Yet Kim Jong-un's lack of the necessary leadership experience and seniority can serve to magnify major defects of the succession process that could be fatal to regime survival. He is too young to build a strong power base of his own and too inexperienced to handle the factional strife of his father's peers and his brothers' supporters alone. His anointment may change the rules of the game for those DPRK elites who favor him, but in a country that still

¹⁹ - When CCP Vice Chair Li Xiannian attended the KWP Congress in August 1975, he was seated between the two Kims. He noticed that when people came to the conference platform with documents to be signed, they all approached Kim Jong-il. This clearly showed that just two years after his anointment the power transfer was already well under way. Oral information collected in Beijing, July 2001.

²⁰ - Sung Chull Kim, *North Korea under Kim Jong-il* (State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 92.

²¹ - *Juche* ideologically justifies the Kim family's succession. Grace Lee, "The Political Philosophy of *Juche*," *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2003, pp. 107-108.

operates in a Confucian political culture, seniority does influence the leader's acceptance by the elite. Therefore, a faltering dynastic transfer of power under circumstances where the patriarch is in poor health may create a power vacuum in the process of transition and leave the regime dangerously exposed to internal infighting. This simply proves the fatal flaw in the mechanism of divide-and-rule: it is effective only for a leader who has already built up firm control. Yet for a new young leader with insufficient authority, the process of consolidation becomes tougher. This reveals another key flaw of the DPRK: when the state's survival depends on the health or life of just one person, the system is bound to be weak, fragile and without a long future.

It seems that all the questions regarding the DPRK's succession may be boiled down to one; that is, how long Kim Jong-il can hang around. Given Kim Jong-il's poor health and personal experience of succession, it is inconceivable that he does not have concrete plans for his son.²² In fact Kim Jong-un's anointment in 2010 allowed the DPRK to escape the desperate situation of Kim Jong-il's sudden departure leaving no designated successor. That would have been utterly destabilizing for the dynasty. Now Kim can implement a dual succession plan for Kim Jong-un: an emergency arrangement in case of his sudden death, and a gradual power transition if he lives on. The measures for protection are numerous. At the core is a family triumvirate based on Kim Jong-il himself, his brother-in-law Jang Sung Taek and his sister Kim Kyong-hui. These three will collectively assist Kim Jong-un in the takeover. In case of Kim Jong-il being incapacitated suddenly, the surviving couple will oversee major state affairs on behalf of the son until the political situation stabilizes.²³

²²- In 2001 Kim Jong-il had a serious car accident, but he recovered well. Since then he has been contemplating this issue. Information by Lu Guangye, former PLA attaché to Pyongyang, in Sydney on July 14, 2003.

²³- Interview with Beijing's DPRK specialist, January 2011, Beijing.

Jang Sung Taek's role is particularly crucial. His appointment as deputy chair of the NDC in 2010 was part of the succession package. He is a key buffer between the successor and the complicated body politic of the DPRK, given his wide connections in the Party and the military.²⁴ And behind Jang is his wife Kim Kyong-hui, who embodies the continuation of the Kim family legitimacy beyond Kim Jong-il. At a critical moment in the power struggle she could act as the family representative to influence post-Kim Jong-il politics. This may be the reason why she was promoted to a top military rank and a seat in the Politburo at the same time that Kim Jong-un was named as the successor. And at the next layer is the KPA, which can provide reliable insurance for Kim Jong-un to stay in power.

The Military's Role and Its Rising Political Influence

Indeed the KPA is the key power institution that can prevent the country from sliding into chaos after Kim Jong-il's sudden departure.²⁵ Kim Jong-il, like his father, relied on both the Party and the military to consolidate power in his first years as the heir-designated. But he has primarily used the KPA for that purpose. Rationally he saw control over the gun as a short cut to control over other state apparatuses. And legally he has made the NDC surpass the Party's Politburo in importance in his running of state affairs.²⁶ The result is the "military-first" policy, which has given the military not only the biggest share of national resources but a dominant position in society.²⁷ In the wake of Kim's illness in 2008,

²⁴ - Jang is from a military family. His two brothers are top-ranking officers.

²⁵ - For the military's role in DPRK elite politics, see Joseph Bermudez, *The Armed Forces of North Korea* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

²⁶ - See Ken Gause, *The North Korea Leadership: The Evolving Regime Dynamics in the Kim Jong-il Era* (Alexandria: CAN Corporation, 2003).

²⁷ - Alexandrer Vorontsov, "North Korea's Military-First Policy: A Curse or a Blessing," *Policy*

“military-first” is no longer just a policy, but an institutionalized framework of control over every aspect of political life in North Korea.

Therefore, in the ruling hierarchy Kim Jong-il's military deputy in the NDC would be first in line to take the helm after he dies.²⁸ The purpose of making Kim Jong-un a top military commander is to build a bridge to his eventual command of the KPA, but there is still a gap in the power transfer framework as he has yet to be appointed deputy chair of the NDC. He has not joined any of the key policy-decision bodies such as the Politburo Standing Committee. Apparently Kim Jong-il is sensibly carrying out a phased succession arrangement for his son. The first step is to put the son in the limelight to prepare the nation for his succession plan. Although time is running short for Kim Jong-un, some incrementalism is still necessary in order to see if the son is a suitable heir. Since Kim Jong-il's first deputy to the NDC Cho Myong-rok passed away in November 2010, his post has been deliberately left unfilled pending Kim Jong-un's promotion when he finally passes his father's continuous tests and proves his ability to command the military.

Kim Jong-il deviated from his father's means of control over the armed forces: the father controlled the military through a trusted deputy in the KPA and by subjecting the KPA to the Party. Now Kim Jong-il commands the gun by allowing a number of high-powered military agencies and individuals to report to him directly and personally, most noticeably the three general headquarters.²⁹ Civilian control of the military has been reduced to his strongman style of control. The KPA has thus become his family army. As a consolidation measure and a divide-and-rule practice, this has been effective. Yet it has generated an overtly

Forum Online, 06-45A, June 8, 2006.

²⁸ Michael Green's comments. *Voice Of America*, September 10, 2008.

²⁹ Ken Gause, *North Korea Civil-Military Relations: Military-first Politics to a Point*, U.S. Army War College, September 2006.

personalized command chain and stimulated factionalization among senior officers.

The unintended outcome of this is that it will be harder for the successor to possess sufficient personal authority to manage such a fragmented system. He will be forced to expand the divide-and-rule mechanism and further factionalize the armed forces. Doing so is like drinking poison to ease thirst. On the surface an uneasy balance of power among the top brass may be achieved, but the very foundation for a unified military will have been seriously eroded. In addition this may give rise to a natural tendency at the beginning of the succession: the successor's power is weak but the generals' influence is strong, as the military has such privileged status in the political system and in society. Divide-and-rule also forces the Kim family to forge special personal ties with the military, not just for a better position in the process of succession but also for their very survival if a deadly power struggle erupts among their relatives. Therefore, the succession challenge in the DPRK may further politicize the KPA, and this in turn would intensify the uncertainties over the succession.

More concretely, the schism within the KPA is institutionalized along two parallel lines. The first is the regular command structure of the KPA. This consists of field armies and garrison troops. Most of the senior officers are loyal followers of the Dear Leader, who has promoted them to top positions. Moreover, two-thirds of Kim's public activities are visits to KPA units.³⁰ However, Kim's relations with the first line of command (regular troops) are relatively less personal than those with the second line of command (the Guard Command), whose commanders accompany the leader all the time. The latter actually form the inner circle of the

³⁰- Ilpyong J. Kim, "Kim Jong-il's Military-First Politics," in Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim (eds.), *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), p. 61.

military clique with immediate access to Kim. They are in firm control of the information flow and serve as “big brother at the back” in the KPA. Kim is highly dependent on their loyalty to execute his succession plan, as they also maintain close contacts with his sons and other family members. These units are a system within the system, only answerable to Kim, although theoretically they exist within the structure of the regular command.

It is commonly believed that the DPRK's succession process will further enhance the military's influence. Even if the succession falters and the country is thrown into political disorder, it is unlikely that the military will be disbanded. The logical question is whether the collapse of the Kim dynasty will mean the collapse of the DPRK. If there is no U.S.-led war of regime change against the DPRK, a military junta may emerge in Pyongyang to manage the state. As a result North Korea may continue to persist, although in a volatile manner.³¹

However, it is not sensible to assume that the KPA is one seamless entity and will act as a united force in protecting the successor. Although it is not very clear to what extent Kim Jong-il's divide-and-rule has factionalized the KPA, it is a fact that the regular army and imperial guard compete for Kim's favor, and they do not always interact harmoniously. And key commanders maintain individual ties with Kim family members, such as Jang Sung Taek and Kim Jong-hui, who helped in their promotion. If the KPA cannot act as a unified force during the power transfer, and if Kim Jong-il leaves the scene prematurely, the young commander-in-chief will be hard-pressed to exert ultimate authority. Even if this worst-case scenario does not occur, there will inevitably be a protracted period of power negotiation with unpredictable consequences. Certainly Kim Jong-il has taken this into consideration. He promoted Lee Young-ho to

³¹ - The view of Beijing's DPRK specialists, January 2011, Beijing.

the position of the military's primary guardian of Jong-un. Now Lee is the youngest member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo and the top KPA figure. He was chief of Kim's security force and now heads the regular army as its chief of general staff. This will be useful in bridging the gap between the two parallel commands under one effective general. Recently Kim Jong-il has promoted a number of princelings who are close to his family to key military posts, headed by General O Il-jeong.³² These will form an inner circle around Kim Jong-un to assist his power consolidation. If they are loyal to the younger Kim and accorded with enough power, a relative orderly succession may be executed according to Kim Jong-il's expectations.

North Korea's Succession and China's Reaction: Hedging for the Worst

China's response to Kim Jong-un's anointment has been unusually swift, in sharp contrast to its response to Kim Jong-il in the 1970s. The worsening security situation on the peninsula in 2010 was a crucial background factor, as Pyongyang adopted ultra-harsh counter-measures against Lee Myung-bak's pressure-based DPRK policy.³³ And inter-Korean tensions may be worsened by the succession uncertainties in Pyongyang. In 2010 Korea replaced Taiwan as the area where China has the greatest fears of war. Dai Bingguo's prompt visit to the South on November 27, just three days after China postponed a scheduled foreign minister meeting in Seoul in protest against a U.S. aircraft carrier entering the Yellow Sea,

³²- *Chosun Ilbo*, April 14, 2011, relaying a broadcast of Pyongyang's Central Television on April 13, 2011.

³³- Talks of Zhang Zujian and Zhang Zhaozhong, *Associated Korean Press*, December 28, 2010.

revealed Beijing's assessment of the explosive situation in the peninsula: that this was no time to place "diplomatic face" above efforts to avert war. Hu Jintao used unusual phrasing such as "very fragile and on the brink of getting out of control" to characterize the tension in his telephone conversation with Obama in December.³⁴ Beijing's Korean policy is now facing its biggest test of the post-Cold War era.

Beijing's options have become narrower and from now on it will be constantly forced to choose the lesser of several evils. Supporting Kim Jong-un is apparently one result of this consideration. On the other hand, it is too early to assess how Kim Jong-un's anointment has influenced Beijing's Korea policy because he has not been given real responsibility. Thus any analysis must be broadly based and generic.

Structuring Support to Kim Jong-un into Beijing's DPRK Policy

First, Mao's non-supportive attitudes toward the DPRK succession in 1975 were ideologically driven. Today Hu's approach is based on concerns about national interests that are ultimately defined by China's political stability. Thus Hu's overall diplomacy and national defense strategies have been made to serve his domestic policy priorities.³⁵ This necessitates an ambiguous foreign policy in which Beijing would rather shelve irresolvable international conflicts than seek unpredictable gains by addressing them. Under this guiding principle, Beijing's emphasis on crisis aversion on the peninsula amounts to support for the DPRK regime's survival. By extension, its response to Kim Jong-un's succession has been structured toward this end. In a way, China is not so much in favor of Kim's hereditary transfer of power as it is for maintaining a

³⁴ - *Xinhua News Agency*, December 6, 2010.

³⁵ - Liu Jixian, "New Development of PLA Political Work: Study Hu Jintao's Military Thought," *Zhongguojundui zhengzhigongzuo*, No. 10, 2008, p. 2.

precarious balance between protecting Pyongyang and creating conditions for Korea's eventual reunification on terms favorable to China.

Secondly, its support for Kim Jong-un does not change Beijing's basic conception of the North as a major source of regional instability, and removing this instability is Beijing's motivation for supporting a German unification model resulting in a reunified Korea friendly to China, keeping a degree of distance from Japan, and without any U.S. military presence along the Sino-Korean border. Logically the reality of 2010 may have convinced more Chinese policy-makers to discard the myth of a "buffer," and more of them may embrace the idea of the North as a liability.³⁶ Therefore maintaining good relations with Seoul is in Beijing's best long-term strategic interests in regards to forging a congenial regional order. Yet since this path is full of uncertainties, it is better for Beijing to retain the status quo on the peninsula for the time being. Support for Kim Jong-il's succession plan is part of this arrangement.

Third, currently the most realistic security threat to Beijing comes not only from Pyongyang's adventurism but also from the breakdown of the long-held tacit agreement between Beijing, Washington and Seoul that "using the military to resolve challenges from the North is not an option."³⁷ And each country's change in stance reinforces the others, forming a vicious circle of tension escalation. The enhanced U.S.-ROK alliance following the Cheonan incident has been driven by a more strident hostile intent, concretely embodied by measures of brinkmanship such as continued war drills in areas also claimed by North Korea. To Beijing's

³⁶- On Chinese debate on buffers and liability, see You Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy," *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, Volume 4, Issue 5, 2004.

³⁷- The quote is from William Perry's speech to the workshop *Military Alliance in the Post-Cold War Era* in Tokyo, December 2-6, 1998. Since 2008 the basic thinking in Washington has changed. Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun used moderate words to describe this new U.S.-ROK consensus in "The Obama Administration and Preparation for North Korea Instability," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2009, p. 11.

analysts this is as risky as the North's provocations.³⁸ In policy terms this undermines Beijing's definition of the status quo on the peninsula: namely, North Korea becomes nuclear-free and the U.S. refrains from stifling North Korea through military means. China's "neutrality" in 2010 was symbolic of its opposition to Lee Myung-bak's pro-U.S. policy. Given Kim Jong-il's succession uncertainty as a source of regional instability, Beijing's support for the son is what the Kim family urgently needs. So supporting Kim Jong-un is a strategic necessity, not a personal choice, despite the fact that the Chinese have been well aware from the outset that Kim Jong-un will likely turn his back on his Chinese supporters in the future since the conflicts of vital interests between the two countries are structural and thus rigid.³⁹ Consequently Beijing no longer has a clear long-term DPRK policy except in terms of crisis management. If anything, its DPRK policy is *ad hoc*, issue-oriented, short-term and driven by domestic politics.

Managing the Fallout of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Incidents⁴⁰

The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents have had a profound impact on regional security, as they threatened to return the peninsula to the Cold-War confrontation between two blocs facing off along the 38th parallel. China has no intention of allowing such a development. The enhanced U.S.-ROK alliance since the Cheonan incident has helped the U.S. military to close in on China through the entry of carrier battle groups into the Yellow Sea. Beijing's biggest dilemma is that it must prop up a regime that it does not like at all. It is caught in the crossfire

³⁸- "China firmly opposes U.S.-ROK naval drills in the Yellow Sea," *To Kung Pao*, July 2, 2010.

³⁹- Zhang Liangui (a prominent expert on North Korean affairs in the CCP Central Party School), "Pyongyang's wooing Beijing is just a tactical adjustment," *Renminzhoubkan* [Celebrities], December 2010.

⁴⁰- Partly extracted from You Ji, "Dealing with the "North Korea Dilemma": China's Strategic Choices," *Working Paper* 229, RSIS (Nanyang Technological University, 2011), pp. 31-32.

between the two Koreas and is a victim of Pyongyang's provocations, but it has to swallow that bitter fruit. Kim Jong-il strongly resisted Beijing's interference when planning his acts of adventurism. The ROK brought the U.S. Navy in the Yellow Sea, producing a profound military and domestic impact on Chinese strategic thinking.⁴¹ This made it harder for Beijing to take a fair stance on the Yeonpyeong shelling despite Lee Myung-bak's personal plea, although China's security experts criticized Pyongyang for causing civilian casualties.⁴² Moreover Beijing's moves to protect the DPRK from collapse can also be seen from another angle: as a way of dealing with a U.S.-led encirclement against China.⁴³ The North could be used to counterbalance that effort. Neutrality is thus a means to an end, not the end in itself. Although the price to be paid is very high, it is still the lesser of two evils in comparison to the fallout from a North Korean collapse.

Beijing's "neutrality" stems from its enhanced concerns of war on the peninsula since 2008 and especially in 2010. Lee Myung-bak's 2010 Liberation Day Address sanctioned a unification model going beyond "crisis management," implying comprehensive preparations for a sudden collapse of the DPRK. For this he proposed consideration of a unification tax to financially prepare for absorption of the North by amassing a sum of \$US2.14 trillion in three decades.⁴⁴ Militarily, this year's Ulchi Freedom Guardian joint U.S.-ROK exercise was not only the largest in scale but was designed to operationalize *Concept 5029*.⁴⁵ Although neither Washington nor Seoul sees military intervention as an option against

⁴¹ - General Ma Xiaotian said in the *Shangri-la Dialogue* in May 2010 that the U.S.-ROK naval drills happened at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

⁴² - Shen Dingli, "Ending the Tension," www.china.org, November 27, 2010.

⁴³ - On this encirclement, see John Garver and Feiling Wang, "China's Anti-Encirclement Struggle," *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2010, p. 258.

⁴⁴ - "Lee Lays Out Three-Stage Master Plan for Reunification," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 16, 2010.

⁴⁵ - "Sudden reunification would cost \$2.1 trillion," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 16, 2010.

Pyongyang for the time being, their attempt to bring down Pyongyang through sustained military tension increases the prospects of war and thus is at odds with the long-standing Beijing-Washington-Seoul joint effort to avoid war on the peninsula.

China is facing new pressure to rein in Pyongyang. This raises an old question of how much influence Beijing has on the DPRK. Given China's substantial economic aid to the DPRK, i.e., 70% of all international food aid and up to 80% of its energy needs,⁴⁶ its influence is logically considerable. More concretely this amounts to one million tons of grain and 0.5 million tons of heavy oil, constituting over half of China's entire foreign aid.⁴⁷ Yet using economic aid to change North Korea's behavior is a one-off and an irreversible weapon, as it is linked to the DPRK's survival. Because of its vital nature, if China were to suspend aid and cause a serious crisis in the country, China would replace the U.S. as Pyongyang's number one enemy. In punishing Pyongyang by cutting off aid, China may shoot itself in the foot. China would rather reserve its potential punitive power than put it to practical use.

Fundamentally what emboldens Kim Jong-il is his understanding that none of his neighbors has the stomach for war. Although Washington explores military solution vis-à-vis Pyongyang, it is still highly reluctant to use force, which is opposed not only by China but also by many U.S. allies. Yet these confused signals - war avoidance on the one hand but heightened military pressure on the other - have partially stimulated Pyongyang to mount provocations that fall just short of real acts of war. Under the circumstances Beijing's options are limited in the face of this brinkmanship from both sides.

⁴⁶-Ether Pan, "The China-North Korea Relationship," *Council on Foreign Relations Brief Paper*, July 11, 2006.

⁴⁷-Y. W. Kihl & H. N. Kim, *North Korea: The Politics of Survival* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), p. 197.

For instance, in early June 1999 Kim Yong-nam, the speaker of the DPRK's parliament, paid a visit to Jiang Zemin in Beijing and submitted a request for China to support the KPA in "teaching the South a lesson," referring to the North's planned retaliation in the disputed area in the West Sea. Jiang categorically refused the plea. Just a week after Kim Yong-nam's return to Pyongyang, the first serious armed clash took place in the West Sea, alarming Beijing. In subsequent meetings between senior military officers, the two sides reached an agreement that the North must notify China of any military plans against the ROK.⁴⁸ It is obvious that Pyongyang did not bother to inform Beijing prior to the Cheonan event. Its adventurism put Beijing in an awkward position afterward.⁴⁹ Nor was Beijing notified beforehand when Pyongyang unilaterally suspended the Armistice Treaty in 2009. The KPA did give Beijing a short notice about the Yeonyeong shelling in 2010 but went ahead with the action despite the latter's opposition. These events demonstrated the level of influence Beijing has on the North, which takes advantage of Chinese aid but seeks to trap China in unwanted crises. However, signs of a softening of the North's stance toward the ROK since December 2010, such as its backing down from promised retaliation against the South's artillery drills in the Yeonyeong Island, were due to China's efforts in November 2010 to pressure Kim Jong-il to restrain himself.⁵⁰ Moreover, the extent to which Beijing's pressure works is also affected by the U.S./ROK hostile intent against Pyongyang, over which Beijing has no control. The North's response to this agenda is logical and Beijing is not in a strong position to

⁴⁸- Speech by a senior researcher at the Beijing Contemporary Institute of International Relations at the specialist workshop *The PRC at Fifty: Towards a Responsible Power*, Australian National University, October 29, 1999.

⁴⁹- Oral sources from Beijing's experts on North Korea in February 2011.

⁵⁰- Qu Xing (a senior Chinese diplomat), *News in Focus Today*, CCTV-4, April 28, 2011. Also John S. Park, *On the Issues: Tensions on the Korean Peninsula*, U.S. Institute of Peace, December 27, 2010.

oppose it. The cycles of action/reaction are not black and white.

China may have set a different bottom line in dealing with Pyongyang as a result of being forced to swallow some bitter fruit in 2010. Although Beijing has not openly criticised the North, in private it deeply resents Pyongyang's acts and will remember the serious harm they brought to its vital interests. For instance, the Cheonan incident has translated the North/South confrontation into unnecessary Sino-U.S. tension, adversely affecting China's overall standing and security in the region. Beijing's forced "neutrality" hurt its image as a responsible big power, and in particular lost it the trust of ROK elites who may have a key bearing on China's long-term designs for Korean unification. "Neutrality" betrayed Beijing's principle of keeping an equal distance between the two Koreas.⁵¹ For Beijing to create conditions to prevent the 2010 crises from being repeated in the future, its status quo policy has to be reshaped in the context of North Korean brinkmanship that indirectly harms China's strategic interests. The deepening DPRK crisis may trigger a prompt policy change in Beijing, which is now preoccupied with near-term crisis management in Korea.⁵² Once the situation stabilizes, Beijing must contemplate a long-term response with new approaches to the DPRK challenge. Specifically, Beijing has already depicted North Korea as a normal neighbor. What it needs to do in the future is to operationalize that concept into concrete policies according to Pyongyang's merits and challenges rather than "historical ties." China's North Korea policy is increasingly in flux.⁵³

⁵¹- On this principle of balance, see Gong Keyu, "Tension on the Korean Peninsula and Chinese Policy," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2009, p. 114.

⁵²- According to Jin Canrong's speech to *Grand Academic Forum*, Phoenix TV, December 13, 2010.

⁵³- On the concept of a normal state, Ambassador Yang Wenchang has characterized Sino-DPRK relations as relations between two normal neighbors - probably the first open

Kim Jong-un and the Future Korean Conflict

At the moment there are many dependent and independent variables involved in the relationship between Pyongyang's complicated succession politics and the hostility among the parties involved in the peninsula crisis. As mentioned earlier, Kim Jong-un has not been given real responsibility, and there are still huge uncertainties about his political fate. Any assessment on his future is premature, especially when we all know that DPRK elite politics is a tightly closed book and the Kim Jong-il family is extremely mysterious. Similarly, except for Beijing's reactive backing of Kim Jong-un, it is not yet clear how the succession will translate into concrete policies regarding the North/South conflict, the nuclear standoff and U.S. involvement in the region.

Yet some scholarly analysis can be pursued based on common sense understanding of DPRK politics. It is a widely held view that the difficult evolution of the DPRK's succession was a key factor behind its provocations in 2010.⁵⁴ By such logic, the period of dynastic transfer of power is a time when dictators in rogue states attempt brinkmanship as a way to shift attention away from domestic challenges. North Korea needs to vent frustration over its unresolved domestic problems through adventurism abroad in order to help Kim Jong-un build authority at home. He will be tempted to adopt a hard-line stance to convince his seniors, peers and followers that he can stand firm and face up to the South, U.S. imperialism and Chinese interference. Only then will he be seen as worthy successor of the DPRK's revolutionary course created by his grandfather, continued by his father and now carried forward by himself. Following this line of argument, it is logical to assume that Kim

expression of this concept from official Chinese circles. *Chosun Ilbo*, June 8, 2007.

⁵⁴-"North Korea may have further provocations for power succession," *Yonhap News*, February 10, 2011.

Jong-un will uphold North Korea's military-first policy, protect the vital interests of the KPA and its special status in the political system and in society, and withstand international pressure to denuclearize. Then one may conclude that under Kim Jong-un the KPA will remain tough on territorial disputes with the South; it will be more persistent in its nuclear ambitions; and it will be aggressively vigilant when challenged. All this heralds troubled times ahead for the peninsula. This logic of assertiveness during a succession, common in most authoritarian regimes, may prove to be the source of further DPRK hostility that will drag China and other regional states into an unwanted confrontation.

However, there is another logical argument that mitigates the seemingly sensible argument above. Most authoritarian states would prefer to lay low in crisis as a natural choice for regime survival, unless they are backed into a corner. After all, they interact with major powers from a position of vulnerability. A weaker power's assertiveness often reflects the Sun Tze stratagem of "taking an offensive posture for the real purpose of defense." Under that circumstance, the leaders of such states know the limits of brinkmanship and always back down before being cornered. Leading the weakest country in Northeast Asia and surrounded by powerful enemies, Kim Jong-il has become a master of this stratagem, especially in crisis situations. This is the most valuable trait for his son Kim Jong-un to emulate. If the heir can indeed learn from his father's elasticity, it could become his most effective regime survival strategy.

China's security experts do not buy the idea of shifting from a domestic to an international crisis.⁵⁵ This concept may work for a state that is in trouble at home but is still a strong power. It is unaffordable luxury for a country facing the prospect of collapse. Crisis shifting is a tool

⁵⁵- This is an impression I gained from my interview with China's Korean specialists in February 2011 in Beijing.

for regime survival, not for suicide. In a vulnerable state of affairs during the process of power consolidation, Kim Jong-un is better off not waging uncontrollable provocations against the South. And he is unlikely to engage in suicidal actions. His foreign policy will be based on concerns of domestic stability, not military adventurism overseas.⁵⁶ This is the majority view in Beijing.

Chinese security analysts have paid a lot of attention to Kim Jong-un's comment that the primary governing principle is to let the people fill their stomachs.⁵⁷ When analyzed in the context of Pyongyang's security policies, this remark may shed some light on his mindset as the next leader. Firstly, the military-first policy will not change in the national policy hierarchy, as it is the DPRK's strategy for regime survival. Yet the economic aspect of it will be more heavily emphasized and this will affect the North's overall foreign policy. Domestically, the new thinking on economics may boost the incentive for economic reforms. Inevitably this will lead the heir to visit China to learn ideas and practices of reform.⁵⁸

Some conciliatory rhetoric has come out of Pyongyang since the beginning of this year. The visit to North Korea by former U.S. President Carter in late April further enhanced the Chinese perception that the ongoing succession in Pyongyang may actually rekindle its efforts to reach out to the world, especially to Washington. This was expressed in the personal message carried by Carter to Lee Myung-bak that he would unconditionally meet Lee to discuss "anything" to ease the tension.⁵⁹

⁵⁶- Comments by Major General Zhang Zhaozhong of the PLA National Defense University, *News in Focus Today*, CCTV, February 28, 2011.

⁵⁷- It is reported that Kim Jong-un recently said that "Food is more important than bullets." *The New York Times*, December 27, 2010.

⁵⁸- For the first time since Kim's anointment, CCTV mentioned his forthcoming visit to China, a rare occurrence in Sino-DPRK relations. Lu Jian in *News in Focus Today*, CCTV, April 26, 2011.

⁵⁹- *Morning News at 7am*, Shanghai Satellite TV, April 29, 2011.

During the transfer of power Pyongyang's reaction to military challenges from the South and the U.S. will be pragmatic and avoid fatal confrontations. For instance, Pyongyang must put on a tough face over the U.S.-ROK war drills, but it will be very wary of taking counter actions. This is consistent to what Kim Jong-il promised to Hu Jintao in December 2010. Kim Jong-un is likely to continue this stance.⁶⁰

The motivation behind Pyongyang's vocal pledge to reinstate the denuclearization process is highly dubious.⁶¹ Yet it places the ROK in a difficult position: denuclearization through regime change is still a premature concept, but there is no other feasible mechanism for proceeding. If the South continues to resist the six-party talks, as mentioned earlier, it will be playing into Kim Jong-il's hands. Kim Jong-un will follow his father's preferences, drawing a balance that allows for retention of nuclear material, suspension of further production, and continued participation in the Talks. Now Beijing is seeking any workable formula to restart the denuclearization process, including informal bilateral or multilateral talks as a transitional step toward later resumption of the six-party talks, which serves Pyongyang's preference for direct dialogue with the U.S.⁶² America seems to have shelved the idea of an apology. One key theme of Carter's visit to Pyongyang was denuclearization. This indicated a useful unofficial diplomatic strategy for denuclearization, which serves U.S. interests. It seems that the ball is in Seoul's court.

⁶⁰ - Wu Dawei, Chinese special envoy on Korean affairs, told his ROK counterpart that Beijing hoped to see North/South dialogue and was not against DPRK-U.S. direct talks. These would help enable a resumption of the six-party talks. "North Korea may propose North/South nuclear talks," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 18, 2011.

⁶¹ - Message from Kim Yong-nam to Carter at their meeting on April 27, 2011. *New China News Agency*, April 28, 2011.

⁶² - In his news briefing on April 26, 2011 Chinese foreign spokesman Hong Lei stressed the urgent need to restart the denuclearization process but mentioned nothing about the six-party talks.

Conclusion

The succession issue is an unresolved challenge for North Korea, whose vulnerability lies in the single fact that the whole nation's fate hinges on the fate of one person who is in poor health.⁶³ Heredity is a fragile mechanism for the orderly transfer of power, forcing the country to suffer periodic succession uncertainties. Each transition may deal a fatal blow to the whole system. Now the feudal dynastic cycle in North Korea has again reached a critical point of evolution. Whether the DPRK can survive this round of power transfer is anyone's guess. Yet clearly the surrounding countries are formulating contingency plans to hedge against any sudden crisis on the peninsula.

Beijing's plan is embedded in its support for Kim Jong-un's succession, although this support was adopted in a forced and passive way. This plan is structured into China's strategic calculus of maintaining the status quo on the peninsula, which automatically means aiding the Pyongyang regime's survival. In sharp contrast to its reluctance to back Kim Il-sung's power transfer arrangement for Kim Jong-il, Beijing's current response to Kim Jong-un is highly expedient. Put another way, since China's basic calculus is dominated by the need to preserve the DPRK; it could not care less about who is chosen as the heir-apparent as long as he can hold the regime together for a period of time, during which Beijing can gradually facilitate the emergence of a unified Korea that adopts a pro-China policy based on cooperation rather than balance of power. Support of Kim Jong-un is just a means to an end.

Beyond the peninsula, if Pyongyang's succession falters, political and social instability may lead the regime to falter. This would generate a

⁶³-At the 60th anniversary celebration on September 9, Kim Yong-nam, chair of the Supreme People's Assembly, said "we will rely completely on the great leader Kim Jong-il for our fate..." *Chosun Ilbo*, September 13, 2008.

tremendous impact on all of Asia. The idea of the KPA under no effective civilian control and in possession of a crude nuclear capability is a security nightmare for all, not to mention the massive waves of refugees and enormous economic pressure that would accompany the crisis.⁶⁴ As every country surrounding the DPRK has a stake in its survival, it is overly simplistic to believe that an early collapse of the Kim dynasty would be a good thing.

North Korea's succession may not be entirely negative as is commonly believed; it induces tension. Tension rises whenever the Kim family feels that it is backed into a corner. There are advocates of pursuing a policy of cornering the DPRK as a way of inducing regime change. Trapping the North in a tense security environment may drive it to exhaust itself economically in struggling to uphold the military-first policy. Yet if the North did not feel cornered, the Kim family may have preferred to ease tensions on the peninsula for the sake of Kim Jong-un's power consolidation. Opportunities do exist for turning the page from 2010 through a resumption of North/South dialogue and the six-party talks for crisis prevention, although this can give the North breathing space to regroup politically and economically.⁶⁵

Kim's succession process can significantly impact China's DPRK policy, which has been previously focused on the principle of crisis aversion even though Beijing realizes the high costs of this policy: massive

⁶⁴—One estimate by RAND held that South Korea would have to inject US\$700 billion to stabilize North Korea's economy, an amount Seoul does not have. On the consequences of North Korea's economic reforms and failure, see Stephen Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Marcus Noland, *Korea after Kim Jong-il* (Institute for International Economics, 2004), p. 64.

⁶⁵—It has been reported that under joint Sino-U.S. sponsorship secret North/South meetings were held in May in Beijing in which the South proposed to the North to arrange an informal summit between Kim Jong-il and Lee Myung-bak. *7Am News*, Phoenix TV, June 2, 2011. If this is true, it is a positive move to ease tensions on the peninsula.

economic aid to an increasingly unpredictable neighbor. This status quo-based policy symbolizes not only Beijing's lingering "buffer zone" mentality but also its difficulty in finding any feasible alternative. Therefore, Beijing is not in a position to visibly alter its DPRK policy any time soon.⁶⁶ Yet China may have set a different policy bottom line vis-à-vis the North in the wake of its 2010 adventurism which dragged China into a confrontation with America and others against its will. The new policy would be a hedging strategy, the cornerstone of which would be a set of pre-determined plans to preempt a precarious situation on the peninsula. In a sign of heightened threat perception, the PLA has deployed regular units along the Sino-DPRK border and is getting ready to respond to any new crisis that may be brought about by the failed succession. One key element of this strategy is Beijing's joint effort with regional countries to deal with sudden developments in Pyongyang, while at the same time hedging against unwanted upheavals on the peninsula such as might be caused by a ground war for regime change. This strategy has been further complicated by the ongoing succession process in Pyongyang, but Beijing's general view about the prospects for the succession is relatively optimistic, since Kim Jong-il is making detailed plans for the transfer of power and he may still have a number of years to live - years which could be crucial for the heir's power consolidation.

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⁶⁶ - You Ji, "Understand China's North Korea Policy," *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, March 8, 2004.

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