

North Korea's Situation Outlook and Policy Direction after Kim Jong Il's Death

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On the afternoon of December 19th, North Korea's KCNA reported that Chairman Kim Jong Il had passed away at 8:30 AM on the 17th. This article analyzes the situation in North Korea following Kim's death, assessing the outlook for the succession system and the North's likely policy direction.

1. North Korea's Situation

The death of absolute dictator Kim Jong Il puts North Korea in severe crisis. The delay in announcing his death until two full days afterward hints at the crippled state of the decision-making process in the absence of the absolute dictator. When Kim Il Sung died, his son Kim Jong Il was able to function well enough as a leader to guide the situation, making prompt decisions about funeral arrangements, etc. However the death of Kim Jong Il himself creates a power vacuum, with no individual capable of filling his role and taking command of the situation at the top. In fact, the North Korean regime had to take prudent steps to maintain internal solidarity when announcing the leader's death.

The decision to go through with a scheduled missile test launch at 9AM on the day of Kim Jong Il's death

announcement can be interpreted as a warning gesture to the outside world, emphasizing internal solidarity and showing off North Korea's capabilities. North Korea released a fairly detailed account of the cause of death, stating that a "medical analysis" determined that "great mental and physical strain" led Kim to suffer "an advanced acute myocardial infarction, complicated with a serious heart shock." The degree of detail in this announcement suggests a pre-emptive effort to shut down any speculation or suspicion over the cause of death. Most importantly, it appears that North Korea is devoting greater efforts to emphasizing the firm management of the Kim Jong Eun leadership system than to fostering an atmosphere of mourning over Kim Jong Il. When Kim Il Sung died the atmosphere of grief overwhelmed everything else, and the mere mention of Kim Jong Il's succession was considered blasphemous. While formally mourning Kim Jong Il's death, North Korea appears more concerned at the moment with finding a means of surviving without him.

2. Outlook for the Kim Jong Eun Succession

North Korea's emphasis on Kim Jong Eun's leadership in the process of announcing his father's death can be interpreted as a hint that the formal succession process will be sped up. Thus, unlike Kim Jong Il's succession process, where the mourning period lasted for over three years, this time it appears likely that the succession process will be hurried along. However, no matter how fast they move, they will be unable to have the succession structure visibly in place in time for the April 15 holiday. If the succession process is to continue, it is likely that Kim Jong Eun will rise rapidly to the position of supreme commander. The regime will want to take steps to formalize the succession rapidly lest their authority be weakened by signs of delay. In other words, the weakened power base will paradoxically act to speed up the succession process. However if Kim Jong Eun is unable to gain the complete support of powerful figures such as Jang Sung Taek regarding an early power transition, we cannot overlook the possibility of internal conflicts breaking out.

Regardless of the timing of the succession, in the wake of Kim Jong Il's death it seems most likely that the power transfer to Kim Jong Eun will be safely completed in the anticipated manner. Ever since Kim Jong Il suffered his stroke in 2008, North Korea has endeavored to set up a succession structure and put the necessary systems in place to enable Kim Jong Eun to seize power. In April 2009 they revised the Constitution to specify the NDC chairman as the head of the government, and in September 2010 the Korean Workers' Party Guidelines were revised to stipulate that the Party general secretary would serve concurrently as chairman of the Party Central Military Committee.

In the political arena, the various core agencies of the KWP, the military, and the State Security Agency have been kept separate and arranged so that they can check and balance each other and no single organization can challenge Kim Jong Eun's power. All efforts will be made to ensure that Kim Jong Eun inherits his father's command and the powerful elites of the various Party and military sectors remain united in maintaining regime stability, conscious of sharing a collective fate. China's aid can be expected to help keep the regime stable.

It is worth noting that when North Korea announced the Funeral Committee, Kim Jong Eun's name appeared at the top of the roster and was the only name to be marked by the honorific title "*dongji*" (comrade). This is another affirmation of Kim Jong Eun's status as successor.

3. North Korea's Policy Direction and Our Response

North Korea will likely maintain fairly passive domestic and foreign policies for the time being, as it works to stabilize the Kim Jong Eun succession system. For example, since the effort to reach an agreement with the US on resolving the uranium enrichment issue appears to have stalled, it will be difficult for the North to show much assertiveness in its policies toward the US and South Korea. On the other hand, they will probably show greater dependence on China in trying to ease their economic troubles, since they need to extinguish the accumulating public discontent.

In sum, we can anticipate either a bad situation in which the Kim Jong Eun regime stabilizes and the military-first system of Kim Jong Il continues, or an even worse situation in which an unstable succession system and internal conflict in the North have a negative influence on our economy and politics. We must focus our efforts on thorough preparations to ensure that neither of these circumstances comes to pass. For the time being, until Kim Jong Eun formally inherits the role of supreme leader, we should adopt a cautious stance of watching the situation closely. After the succession is formally completed we should communicate our hope for progress in inter-Korean relations and calmly watch for signs of a change in North Korea's stance.