

Kim Jong-un Inherits the Bomb

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Abstract

North Korea's nuclear program has a long history, which serves as a warning that the program is likely to have a long future. The Kim regime's nuclear weapons program will be used by successor Kim Jong-un and his associates for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the North Korean people, and any negotiations relating to this program are likely to be slowed down by Pyongyang's leadership transition but not abandoned. Nuclear talks can accomplish at least four things for a successor North Korean regime. First, they can provide much-needed foreign aid that can be dispensed by the new regime to establish its reputation as a provider for the people. Second, talks can signal international forgiveness for North Korea's 2010 West Sea attacks on South Korea, which Kim Jong-un is being given credit for. Third, talks will confirm that North Korea is a nuclear weapons state, thus setting the stage for negotiations over nuclear arms reduction rather than nuclear arms elimination. And fourth, talks can validate Kim Jong-un as the new leader of North Korea, just as the 1994 talks signaled that the United States accepted Kim Jong-il as his father's successor. In short, talks will strengthen the new Kim Jong-un regime but they will fail to end the regime's nuclear weapons program.

Key Words: Agreed Framework, nuclear weapons, regime change, six-party talks, succession

* The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organizations with which they are affiliated.

Nothing more immediately defines North Korea for the international community than its nuclear weapons program. Arguably there are other aspects of the country that are as important, such as its chemical and biological weapons, its conventional and special forces, its poverty, and its abysmal human rights record. But the nuclear issue hangs over everything and is the main reason that the big powers are willing and even eager to meet with North Korean officials.

Since the early 1990s, thousands of newspaper and magazine articles have described and commented on North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Policy analysts such as ourselves have written hundreds of reports examining the motives driving the program and offering suggestions about how to curtail or stop it. Not to be left behind, academics, especially in the social sciences, have viewed the program in terms of cause and effect variables and theoretical predictions. Despite this attention – or perhaps in part because of it – the Kim regime in Pyongyang has pushed forward undeterred in its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The journalistic accounts of the program are written to keep the public informed. The academic papers are intended to test scientific hypothesis. And the analytic reports are commissioned by offices and organizations that seek to denuclearize North Korea. For policy analysts, this program is not an academic problem or puzzle to be solved but rather a mission to be accomplished, and because missions are complicated by myriad real-world factors, the primary tools employed in pursuing the mission must be simple and robust. So simple, in fact, that they will usually be consistent with what scientists sometimes dismissively refer to as “common sense”; that is, the general understanding that has emerged from thousands and even millions of years of human experience. Common sense is usually right – that is why it is so common.¹

¹- Consider, for example, the counter-intuitive predictions of cognitive dissonance theory,

The tool that we use to understand the behavior of the Kim regime is what psychologists call the law of effect, part of the same family of theories as psychological hedonism and economic behaviorism. In every day parlance: “carrots and sticks.” According to this common-sense view, the decision makers in Pyongyang are doing what they believe will bring them the greatest benefits with the least costs. Their behavior is consistent with the behavior of the leaders of the great powers, who have also chosen to arm their own countries with nuclear weapons and who are not about to give those weapons up.

The Nuclear Program’s Long History

North Korea’s nuclear program has a long history, which suggests that the program is deeply imbedded in the country’s defense and foreign policies. The long history also serves as a warning that the program is likely to have an extended future. Since most readers will be familiar with at least the broad outlines of this history, the following is a condensed version.²

In 1956, North Korean scientists began receiving training in the Soviet Union. A small nuclear reactor began operating at the nuclear research complex at Yongbyon in 1965, and by the late 1970s the North Koreans were building their own (five megawatt) nuclear reactor, which

which became popular in the 1960s. These predictions directly contradicted the predictions of behaviorism (reward-and-punishment theory). Unfortunately, cognitive dissonance results only appeared in a very restricted range of situations, and then only some of the time. The basic laws of reward and punishment continued to provide the best explanations most of the time, and still do (e.g., people seek more money for their work and employers use money and other rewards to keep people working).

²-Dozens of books have been written about North Korea’s nuclear program. A readily accessible source of information about the highlights of the program can be found on the NTI (Nuclear Threat Initiative) web site; see North Korea Profile: Nuclear. URL: http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/NK/Nuclear/index.html (accessed May 30, 2011).

began operating in 1986. Although too small to be of practical use for electricity generation, it burns uranium fuel that can be reprocessed into weapons-grade plutonium. Construction of 50 and 200 megawatt reactors was begun in 1984 and 1991 but later abandoned.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the North Koreans embarked on a campaign of deception and delay. After initially claiming that a large building, six stories tall and as long as two football fields, was a textile factory, they finally admitted that their “radio-chemical laboratory” was built to extract plutonium from spent nuclear fuel. In September 1991 Kim Young-nam, then foreign minister, told *Janes Defence Weekly*, “We have no capability to manufacture nuclear weapons and we have no intention to do so.”³ Kim Il-sung made the same denial in a 1992 interview with a correspondent from *The Washington Times*:

As far as the nuclear issue is concerned, our country does not have any nuclear weapons. . . . And, what is more, we don't need nuclear weapons. What is the use of producing one or two nuclear weapons while the big countries have several thousand. . . . And we don't have a delivery system either. So to be honest with you, we don't need nuclear weapons.⁴

Following a delay of several years, North Korea signed an IAEA Non-Proliferation safeguards agreement and provided the IAEA with an inventory of its nuclear program, but when a team of inspectors paid a visit they discovered discrepancies in North Korea's inventory, resulting in a February 1993 call for “special inspections.” The North Koreans refused and promptly announced their intention to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

North Korean delay and deception were tools of a foreign policy

³—“The JDW Interview,” *Janes Defence Weekly*, September 14, 1991, p. 492.

⁴—“Q&A ‘We Don't Need Nuclear Weapons,’” *The Washington Times*, April 15, 1992, p. A11.

that alternated between initiating actions that were viewed by the United States and many other countries as threatening (such as withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or removing fuel rods from their nuclear reactor) and invitations to talk about terminating those actions. Alarmed by North Korea's withdrawal provocation, the United States entered into negotiations with the North Koreans in June 1993, securing from them a "suspension" of the withdrawal one day before it became effective. Negotiations stalled in July 1993 and the North Koreans began unloading spent fuel in May 1994. The U.S. government then sent former president Jimmy Carter to Pyongyang in June 1994 to discuss the issue personally with Kim Il-sung, who agreed to stop unloading the fuel if the United States would return to the negotiating table. Bilateral talks with the North continued even after Kim's death, and on October 21, 1994 the two countries reached what they called an "Agreed Framework" — less than a formal treaty but more than a diplomatic promise.

By the terms of the agreement, North Korea agreed to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear program in exchange for the construction by a U.S.-led international consortium of two light-water reactors (LWRs). Pending completion of the reactor project, North Korea would receive an annual shipment of a half million tons of heavy fuel oil. The Clinton administration also promised to gradually improve diplomatic and economic relations with the Kim regime.

It is not unusual for large construction projects to fall behind schedule, and nothing slows a project down more than having to negotiate it with the North Koreans. It was not until August 2002 that the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) began pouring concrete for the light-water reactors, the first unit of which was originally scheduled for completion in 2003.

American-North Korean relations remained strained, and relations became much worse when in October 2002 a visiting American State

Department delegation reported that the North Koreans admitted to them that they were operating a uranium enrichment program, although the North Koreans later denied that they had said such a thing. As a consequence of this violation of the Agreed Framework and other North Korean agreements, KEDO discontinued fuel shipments in November. In December the North Koreans expelled IAEA inspectors and announced that they would restart their nuclear program. In January 2003 the IAEA adopted a resolution condemning the DPRK's violations of the NPT and North Korea announced its immediate withdrawal from the NPT. Shortly thereafter the North Koreans began reprocessing the 8,000 spent fuel rods they had placed in storage and in January 2004 they invited a U.S. nuclear scientist, Siegfried Hecker, to Pyongyang to look at their nuclear facilities and inspect two jars allegedly containing newly reprocessed plutonium (which he was not able to confirm).

The United States once again entered into talks, this time trying multilateral negotiations in the form of six-party talks, which were convened in August 2003. The talks continue sporadically and on September 19, 2005, a "joint statement" was agreed upon in which North Korea said it was "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning at an early date" to the NPT. On the issue of North Korea's receiving the two light-water reactors they had been promised in the 1994 agreement and which the United States now adamantly opposed, the statement said that the parties "expressed their respect and agreed to discuss at an appropriate time the subject of the provision of light-water reactors to the DPRK."

Chris Hill, the lead American negotiator, professed to be very satisfied: "Everybody is a winner. This is a win-win situation. We got an agreement on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."⁵ However, the

⁵- "U.S. Chief Negotiator Praises Joint Statement as 'Good Agreement,'" *Xinhua*, in English,

agreement, referring to “early dates” and “appropriate times,” did not really amount to much, and both the Americans and North Koreans immediately issued statements that effectively gutted the agreement, with the United States saying that discussion of building LWRs could not begin until it was verified that the North Koreans had eliminated their nuclear program, and the North Koreans cautioning that “The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of the DPRK’s dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing LWRs.”⁶ With George W. Bush in the White House, American-North Korean relations continued to be hostile and no progress was made on the nuclear question. On October 9, 2006, North Korea conducted its first nuclear test, which elicited economic sanctions from the United Nations. The six-party talks resumed in December 2006, and on February 13, 2007, the delegates adopted an “initial actions” document that tentatively moved North Korea toward denuclearization, with North Korea once again promising to abandon its nuclear weapons program and return to the NPT. The North Koreans began shutting down their nuclear facilities, and on June 27, 2008 they demolished the cooling tower of their now-idle nuclear reactor. In October the United States took North Korea off its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

In March 2009 North Korea launched its third intercontinental ballistic missile, in violation of the UN resolution of July 2006, prompting the UN to issue yet another condemnation of Pyongyang’s missile launches. North Korea responded by expelling IAEA inspectors and announcing that it would restart its nuclear reactor. Further, it announced on April 29, 2009, that “it would not participate in the six-party talks under any circumstances.”⁷ Taking a page out of its 2006 foreign policy

September 19, 2005.

⁶-“Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry on Six-Party Talks,” *KCNA*, in English, September 19, 2005.

⁷-“DPRK Party Organ. on Pyongyang’s Decision Not to Participate in Six-Party Talks,” *KCNA*,

playbook (i.e., a July 2006 ICBM launch followed by an October nuclear test), North Korea conducted its second nuclear test, slightly larger than the first, in May 2009, for which it was once again sanctioned by the United Nations.

In March 2010 American nuclear expert Siegfried Hecker was invited to return to Pyongyang, where he was told that North Korea would begin building its own light-water reactor and that it had just completed construction of a uranium enrichment facility.

From the history of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, stretching back at least a quarter of a century, one can observe the following. First, the nuclear program, in terms of its domestically processed uranium to fuel a small reactor, its reprocessing of spent fuel into weapons-grade plutonium, its testing of two nuclear weapons, and its manufacturing of enriched uranium in centrifuges, is important to the North Korean leaders. Second, North Korea has lied about its nuclear program. Third, the nuclear program has incurred significant sunk costs for such a poor country, although these costs are largely borne by the North Korean people, not their leaders. Fourth, by pursuing nuclear weapons, North Korea has incurred additional costs in the form of sanctions and embargoes, as well as incurring the extreme displeasure of the U.S. government. Fifth, North Korea says its program is necessary to deter an attack from the United States. Sixth, North Korea has threatened to attack other countries with nuclear weapons. North Korea has also developed long-range missiles, and although it is not known if these missiles can carry nuclear warheads yet, in the future they probably will. And seventh, the North Koreans speak of their nuclear program with obvious pride. The important inference that can be made from these facts is that, for the decision makers in Pyongyang, the benefits of the nuclear program

outweigh its costs, despite international criticism and sanctions.

Interminable Negotiations

The United States has been involved in nuclear negotiations with North Korea for almost two decades, in two-party, three-party, four-party, and most recently, six-party talks. Going into 2011, the talks have been in recess for over two years but political pressure is building to restart them. China, the host, is eager; the United States is skeptical; and South Korea, still smarting from the two North Korean attacks of 2010, is not ready. Japan and Russia go along for the ride. In April 2009 the North Koreans said they “will never again take part in such [six-party] talks and will not be bound by any agreement reached at the talks.”⁸ However, the North Korean regime must return to the talks in order to reach a new agreement that will provide it with much-needed aid and political acceptance.

Two essential and indisputable facts about the six-party talks are often overlooked or ignored. First, North Korea has always insisted that the nuclear issue only concerns itself and the United States, which it views as a threat. Consider this statement from 2003:

The reality requires the DPRK to deter the escalating U.S. moves to stifle the DPRK with a physical force, [and] compels it to opt for possessing a necessary deterrent force and put it into practice. The U.S. is entirely to blame for this development. The U.S. describes this stand of the DPRK as “threat” and “blackmail” to it. It is, however, illogical. The U.S. was the first to have access to nukes and is the world’s biggest possessor of weapons of mass destruction. The Bush administration asserts that it is just for the U.S. to mount preemptive attacks on other countries when it deems necessary and has already perpetrated them in Afghanistan and

⁸-“DPRK Foreign Ministry Statement on UNSC Resolution, Intent to Withdraw from Six-Party Talks,” KCNA, in English, April 14, 2009.

Iraq. Such a war group of the superpower openly listed the DPRK as part of “an axis of evil” and a target of its preemptive nuclear attack. Isn’t it a threat? How can the possession of means by such a small country as the DPRK for just self-defense along [alone?] be “threat” and “blackmail”?⁹

At multilateral meetings, the other parties to the dispute serve only as a source of material rewards to North Korea, as, for example, when South Korea and Japan provided most of the funds to begin building the two nuclear reactors specified by the Agreed Framework.

Second, the North Koreans made it clear even before the first round of the talks that the talks would succeed only if the United States made a “bold switchover” in its hostile policy toward the DPRK. What would such a policy switchover entail? In August 2003 *KCNA* said that “the only thing the DPRK wants is the conclusion of a non-aggression treaty.”¹⁰ However, according to many other North Korean pronouncements, that is just the beginning. As a nuclear quid pro quo, the North Koreans have demanded economic compensation for energy lost by freezing their nuclear facilities. They also want the removal of the U.S. “nuclear threat,” by which they seem to mean the removal of all U.S. nuclear weapons from the region and an end to the protection provided to South Korea by the U.S. nuclear umbrella. They want a peace treaty and full diplomatic relations with Washington, a guarantee of non-aggression, the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Korea, and an end to the U.S.-ROK security alliance. They also want the elimination of U.S. restrictions on international trade and investment with the DPRK and a pledge not to interfere in the DPRK’s domestic affairs, including its human rights policies. More demands are likely to follow.

⁹-“DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman Warns U.S. Against Taking Nuclear Issue to UN,” *KCNA*, in English, April 30, 2003.

¹⁰-“*KCNA* on Main Way for Settlement of Nuclear Issue,” *KCNA*, in English, August 19, 2003.

By 2005 the North Koreans were saying that they no longer considered the negotiations to be about denuclearization but rather about mutual nuclear arms reduction, thereby changing the rules of the nuclear negotiation game. Before the talks resumed for a fourth round in July 2005, the North Koreans declared, "Now that the DPRK has become a full-fledged nuclear weapons state, the six-party talks should be disarmament talks where the participating countries negotiate the issue on an equal footing."¹¹ Given the certainty that the United States has no intention of completely eliminating its nuclear weapons stockpile, it is reasonable to expect that nuclear negotiations with North Korea will at best result in a freeze or reduction but not an elimination of its nuclear arsenal.

The Bush administration initially called for a "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, but because of the virtual impossibility of verifying anything in North Korea, the demand was simplified by insisting that North Korea abandon both its civilian and military nuclear programs. Kim Gye-gwan, North Korea's head delegate to the talks, responded, "Does it make sense if our country, not a war loser or a criminal country, should be denied peaceful nuclear activities?"¹² This statement shows how far apart the North Koreans and Americans are in their view of the nature of the Kim regime.

The nuclear negotiations, including the six-party talks, are not what they appear to be. Whereas most negotiations are conducted with the hope and reasonable expectation that they will succeed, in the case of the six-party talks, a recognition of their futility has emerged in several stages:

¹¹- "DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman On Denuclearization Of Korea," *KCNA*, in English, March 31, 2005.

¹²- "Nuclear Talks Stretch Into 11th Day As N. Korea Resists Deal," *Yonhap*, in English, August 4, 2005.

first, on the part of serious students of North Korea, who by 2003 shared an almost unanimous consensus that the talks would fail; second, by the media, who began to suspect that the long-running talks were not going anywhere; and lastly by the politicians, who were, and often still are, loathe to admit that the talks are doomed to failure.

The 1994 Agreed Framework allowed the North Koreans to postpone a full accounting of their nuclear program until the LWRs had been constructed. Whether Washington really expected the agreement to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program or whether the agreement was simply viewed an expedient means to freeze the program until North Korea collapsed under the weight of its own political and economic problems is debatable. In hindsight, it is evident that the agreement gave Kim Jong-il several years to consolidate his rule. The defense sometimes offered for the 1994 agreement is that without it, North Korea would have accumulated a much larger nuclear weapons arsenal than it now has, but this argument can be countered with the argument that the Kim regime's future might have been very different without political support and economic aid from the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

If the talks are viewed as political theater, they can be said to enjoy some success because they take pressure off those politicians responsible for ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program. If the talks are supposed to be a serious means of ending that program, they have been a complete failure. Whichever is the case, the talks are likely to be resumed at some point.

Why are the six parties so eager to restart talks that have failed in the past? One possibility is that, although the United States and the other countries have repeatedly insisted that they will not tolerate a North Korean nuclear arsenal, they may be willing to live with a nuclear North Korea that puts limits on its arsenal. Another reason that the United States

chases after talks that have so far failed is that these talks provide an excuse for not having already stopped North Korea's nuclear program. As long as the talks continue, the United States and its negotiation partners can claim that they are actively dealing with the issue in line with the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience." The great advantage that six-party talks have over bilateral talks is that each of the five countries can point to the participation of the other countries as a way to avoid taking full blame for failure.

China gains political stature by hosting the talks and presenting itself as an impartial actor working for peace, although the Chinese are not willing to end their political and economic support of North Korea for fear of destabilizing a fellow communist neighbor. The Russians are happy to play any role in Asia, although about the only thing they bring to the table is their UNSC vote. Among the six parties, the Japanese probably have the lowest expectation for the talks and the lowest opinion of the North Koreans, but the Japanese already have a stringent embargo against North Korea, which gives them little remaining leverage in the negotiations.

"In one sentence, negotiation with the North is a nightmare," said Steven Bosworth, former U.S. special representative for North Korea policy.¹³ DPRK delegations sometimes postpone meetings or fail to appear, even though the Kim regime usually receives some form of payment simply for showing up. Difficult and often fruitless though they may be, negotiations with North Korea are valuable if for no other reason than that they keep lines of communication open and provide the international community with insights into how the North Koreans view their nuclear program.

¹³-Seung-Ryun Kim, "U.S. Officials: 'In Short, Negotiation with the North Is a Nightmare,'" *The Dong-A Ilbo*, English Internet version, March 12, 2005.

The theater of the six-party talks is likely to continue until the international and domestic audiences get tired of the performance. Judging by the reluctance of the United States and South Korea to rejoin the talks in 2011, it seems that negotiation fatigue has already settled in. The North Koreans have been clear about their goals, if not about their intentions. They want the United States to fully support the Kim regime. This is something that American politicians cannot afford to do, for political as well as moral reasons, but they still pretend that there is a solution to this standoff.

North Korean Leadership Succession

Discussion of North Korea's leadership and succession is necessarily speculative. In 1945, who would have predicted that the 33-year-old expatriate Kim Il-sung would end up leading the country for the next 50 years? And in 1994, with his country in economic collapse, who would have expected that the secretive Kim Jong-il would become as strong a dictator as his father? As for the current succession, foreigners were first betting on the eldest son, Kim Jong-nam, and then the middle son, Kim Jong-chul, before events in Pyongyang signaled that the youngest, Kim Jong-un, was tapped for leadership while still in his late 20s.

The North Korean media have frequently spoken of the importance of passing on the country's leadership from one generation to the next, although they are not explicit about whether they mean passing it down from older to younger leaders or specifically through the Kim family line. Combined with the propaganda exalting the Kim revolutionary family, one must assume that the reference is to generations of the Kim family, and that is presumably how most Koreans understand it, even if they are not happy about it.

Many party officials and military officers in North Korea are standing in the wings of power, but there is no evidence that they are expecting to replace the Kim family. If anyone other than a Kim should become supreme leader, it would constitute a political revolution that North Korea would have trouble surviving. Other dictatorships have passed power down to someone outside the ruling family, for example, China after Mao and Burma after Ne Win, but neither of these leaders had already experienced a father-to-son succession and neither had anything like the investment that the Kim regime has made in building a family leadership cult.

With the coming of Kim Jong-un, it is likely that party and military figures will gain more influence than they had under Kim Jong-il and his father simply because initially the young Kim will not have as much power as his father or grandfather wielded. However, if Kim Jong-un has the same kind of political skill as his father and grandfather, he may eventually be able to consolidate power around himself, just as they did.

Clues about how Kim Jong-un will grasp power may be found in the ways his father and grandfather gained power. It should be remembered that Kim Il-sung needed many years to consolidate his unrivaled position in North Korean politics. In the 1940s, Kim used his political talents, along with advice of his Soviet advisors and support of Soviet troops, to take control of the newly established Korean security and military forces, thereby enabling him to out-manuever rival politicians who lacked a military base. In the years immediately following the Korean War Kim's generalship was questioned and several attempts were made to replace him.¹⁴ Kim used his political skills and the backing of the army and secret police to purge political opponents, some of whom were blamed for

¹⁴ - Andrei Lankov tells the story in his *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization*, 1956 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

North Korea's failure to win the war. By the late 1950s Kim had firmer control of the country than before the war, and his economic policy mistakes were covered up by aid from China, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.

As the oldest son, Kim Jong-il had an inside track on succeeding his father, but being a dictator's son was not enough to guarantee him the succession. He had to prove himself to his father and his father's associates. The approval process lasted from the time Jong-il graduated from college in 1964 to the time he was publicly presented as the future leader in 1980. Those who were skeptical of the young Kim's capabilities were either persuaded to change their minds or they were purged.

When Kim Il-sung died on July 8, 1994, no one other than Kim Jong-il was in line to succeed him, but Kim still had to consolidate his political position now that his father was no longer around to back him up. Kim Jong-il placed special emphasis on the military as his main source of support. His distinctive military-first politics, first mentioned in the press in the late 1990s, is now said to have originated with a visit by the 18-year-old Kim to a military base on August 25, 1960.¹⁵ As the years passed propagandists created for the young Kim a personality cult almost as extreme as the one that surrounded his father. Kim Jong-il eventually was credited with all the attributes of his father, including his father's military abilities.

Reports that Kim Jong-un had been tapped as the third generation leader began to appear in early 2009, and from that time a subtle domestic campaign was launched to prepare the public for his political emergence. Kim was officially introduced to Korean citizens at the party congress in September 2010. Rumor has it that the succession has been accompanied

¹⁵ - "45th Anniversary of Kim Jong-il's Start of Songun Revolutionary Leadership Marked," KCNA, in English, August 24, 2005.

by purges of officials who are opposed to the young Kim. In any case there will be a realignment of officials favoring those who can be trusted to support the new leader.

To provide him with political power as well as to give him a suitable public persona, he was made a four-star general, although he is only in his late 20s. It is possible he was also put in charge of the State Security Department, the secret police. If the history of his father's and grandfather's rise to power is any indication, in the years ahead a new personality cult consisting of stories, songs, and slogans will be built around Kim Jong-un. The North Korean people may have little interest in him, but the regime seems to feel that, especially in the absence of any concrete achievements on his part, a personality cult is necessary for someone in his political position.

Kim must somehow gain a reputation in economic, foreign, and military affairs. How the youngest Kim will become an economic genius is yet to be determined, although the only apparent path would be for North Korea to receive massive amounts of foreign aid that the regime could distribute under Kim's name.

He can earn his foreign policy credentials in the same way his father did: with high-profile trips to China and Russia. He is also likely to meet foreign dignitaries visiting Pyongyang, although he missed the chance to meet Jimmy Carter when the former American president made an unofficial visit to Pyongyang in April 2010. There will presumably be other opportunities to follow in the footsteps of his father, who hosted a number of world leaders. South Korea's President Kim Dae-jung visited Pyongyang in June 2000, and President Roh Moo-hyun in October 2007. Russia's President Putin also paid a visit in 2000. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang in late 2000. China's President Jiang Zemin traveled to Pyongyang in September 2001, and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi became the first Japanese head of state to visit North

Korea in September 2002 and again in May 2004. “Why on earth do I have to go visit big countries?” asked Kim Jong-il in August 2000, “Even though I stay in Pyongyang, various powerful countries come visit me, do they not?”¹⁶

For foreigners, the concoction of a military reputation for Kim Jong-un is the most worrisome aspect of the succession. In addition to being appointed a four-star general (in September 2010), Kim Jong-un seems to have been given credit in the domestic media for the two 2010 attacks on South Korea in the West Sea. This campaign to make Kim Jong-un a military leader is consistent with the campaign launched in the early 1990s to give his father, who had never had a military career, a military background by granting him the titles of “marshal” and Supreme Commander of the Korean People’s Army. North Korean propagandists also claimed that when he was just a child, Kim Jong-il was at his father’s side during the Korean War, helping him to plan battles.¹⁷ Kim Jong-il was also given credit for the capture of the U.S. Pueblo spy ship in 1968 and the Panmunjom ax murders in 1976. In the coming years, what real or imagined military feats will be attributed to Kim Jong-un?

Political Succession and North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program

Considering the longevity and costs of North Korea’s nuclear program, one should find little reason to predict that a new Kim regime will discount its value. Unless something goes badly wrong with the succession, it is likely to have only a marginal effect on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and on the negotiations relating to it. Rather,

¹⁶- “Full Dialogue Between DPRK Leader, ROK Media Delegation,” *Yonhap*, in Korean, August 13, 2000.

¹⁷- “Comrade Kim Jong-il’s Experience of War,” *KCNA*, in English, October 1, 1997.

the program is likely to continue until North Korea undergoes a revolutionary change, and for this reason nuclear talks will be largely fruitless no matter who heads up the next Kim-style regime. Conversely, the negotiations, or lack of them, are likely to have some impact on the succession, or if not on the succession, on the first years of the successor's regime.

Consider first the role of nuclear weapons in the coming Kim Jong-un regime. Because Kim Jong-un will be inheriting a military-first government that is on poor terms with most of the world powers, he will want the most powerful weapons available to him. The lesson of Libya, which was invaded some years after it gave up its pursuit of nuclear weapons, is very clear to the North Koreans. Kim also needs nuclear weapons for the prestige it brings him as the leader of one of a small (but growing) group of nuclear powers. More immediately, Kim needs nuclear weapons to negotiate with, because without the kind of foreign aid that may come from trading in some of his nuclear program, his country has no hope of pulling out of its perennial depression.

Although Kim needs nuclear weapons, he also needs negotiations aimed at ending or curtailing the nuclear weapons program, which is an irony and also a warning that the negotiations can hardly expect to end the very program that make negotiations necessary in the first place.

The six-party talks, or their substitute, can accomplish at least four things for a successor North Korean regime. First, they can provide much-needed foreign aid that can be dispensed by the new regime to establish its reputation as a provider for the people. Second, talks can signal international forgiveness for North Korea's 2010 West Sea attacks on South Korea, which Kim Jong-un is being given credit for. Third, talks will confirm that North Korea is a nuclear weapons state, thus setting the stage for negotiations over nuclear arms reduction rather than nuclear arms elimination. And fourth, talks can validate Kim Jong-un as the new

leader of North Korea, just as the 1994 talks signaled that the United States accepted Kim Jong-il as his father's successor. In short, talks will strengthen the new Kim Jong-un regime.

Looking at the situation from the other side, the leadership succession is likely to have some impact on nuclear talks, although here the influence is less certain. Very little is known about succession politics in North Korea, including how much power different players exercise, whether Kim Jong-il's decision-making power is intact despite his poor health, and how much influence Kim Jong-un has. Despite this lack of knowledge, it is probably safe to predict that during the political transition period decision making will not be as simple as it was when Kim Jong-il was at the top of his form. Today, decision making is more likely to be split between Kim and his son and other political players. To the extent that North Korea experiences political instability in the coming years, the regime is likely to delay making important decisions. This was not the case in 1994 when Kim Jong-il took over, but we now know that he had been an important decision maker for some years before his father died.

Whereas optimists may embrace the hope that the new North Korean regime will be more accommodating than its two predecessors, such a hope is likely to be groundless. A new leader from the Kim family, even if he were inclined toward reform and opening (and there is absolutely no reason to believe that Kim Jong-un is) would not want to take any significant steps until he had consolidated his political position, which is likely to take some years. North Korean negotiators may be loathe to compromise for fear of sending a signal that the new regime is not as tough as the current regime, which prides itself on taking an "ultra-hard-line position" in the face of what it considers to be foreign provocations. In any case, there is no reason to expect that Kim Jong-un will be any more willing to trade away North Korea's nuclear weapons than his father or grandfather was.

In conclusion, North Korea's nuclear weapons program will be used by Kim Jong-un and his associates for their own benefit and not for the benefit of the North Korean people, and any negotiations relating to this program are likely to be slowed down by Pyongyang's leadership transition.

Policy Options for Ending North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program

North Korea's commitment to developing a nuclear weapons program has not changed in over a quarter of a century. North Korea's approach to nuclear negotiations has not changed either. There is no reason to expect a new Kim family regime to surprise us with any changes.

The most important thing to keep in mind when negotiating with the Kim regime is that it is preoccupied with its own security. Any rewards that foreigners offer for denuclearization must boost the security of the regime. That is why North Korea's first demand has always been an end to the hostility that the United States (and other nations) harbor against the regime. This "switchover" demand transcends the nuclear issue. The Kim regime will not be satisfied until it is treated as a respectable member of the international community, regardless of its abhorrent and dysfunctional domestic policies and history of past international aggression.

The second thing to keep in mind is that if the United States and major powers consider nuclear weapons to be the ultimate military deterrent, the North Koreans would be foolish to forego such a deterrent. Likewise, if the United States believes it to be impossible to abandon nuclear weapons, North Korea will share this belief. Thus even if the United States were to end its hostile policy toward the Kim regime, that regime would still be expected to hold on to its nuclear deterrent.

In short, there is probably no price that could be paid to end North

Korea's nuclear weapons program, and certainly none that could end it in a verifiable manner. Embargo and containment have limited usefulness as long as China supports the Kim regime, and North Korea's plutonium, uranium, and nuclear weapons cannot be easily eliminated by surgical military strikes. In any case, North Korea has other weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons that could be used to threaten the United States and its allies, and any attack on North Korea would likely trigger a second Korean War of incalculable cost.

In 2011 the North Korean nuclear threat is greater than it was in 1994, and as in 1994, no satisfactory solution is at hand. If the military option is rejected as too costly, there remain at least three alternatives. One is to ignore the North Korean nuclear program. This virtually invites the Kim regime to increase its threats, but those stronger threats may register on other countries (such as China) as well as on the United States. Another alternative is to negotiate once again with the Kim regime and settle for a deal that only partially eliminates the nuclear threat.

A third alternative is to go after the regime rather than its nuclear weapons, not with guided missiles but with guided information directed at the North Korean people, who do not gain any security from nuclear weapons. In their present circumstances, these 22 million people lack the power to change or even question their government's policies, but if the people had more knowledge, they might gradually gain the power to govern themselves.

The North Korean media are explicit about the threat of outside information: "[T]hose taken by bourgeois ideology and culture cannot but be vulgar men devoid of any faith and ungrateful to the party and the leader. Then the government, army, and people will be torn into fractions, making it impossible to defend their leadership [i.e., the Kim family]."¹⁸

¹⁸- "Rodong Sinmun Calls for Checking Bourgeois Ideological Penetration," KCNA, in English, quoting a *Rodong Sinmun* article of the same date, August 2, 2005.

Undermining the Kim regime is not the favored policy of the United States or, it seems, of any other country. It is human nature to attend to immediate threats from nuclear weapons at the expense of long-term threats from an irresponsible and hostile regime, and it is the nature of politicians to favor expediency and popularity over realism.

Regime change in North Korea could take a long time and the outcome would be unpredictable. If a regime-replacement operation had been launched in 1994 instead of throwing support to the Kim regime through the Agreed Framework, the Kim regime might not have survived the Arduous March period of 1995-1998 and the debate about how to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program would have already been settled. Instead, the debate continues year after year, with no end in sight.

▪ Article Received: 5/9 ▪ Reviewed: 5/25 ▪ Revised: 5/31 ▪ Accepted: 6/5

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