

North Korea in its Third Generation Of Leadership: Prospects for the Future

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May 23, 2012
UPF Office of Peace and Security Affairs

Round table Sponsored by UPF Office of Peace and Security Affairs, Washington, DC
The Green Room of *The Washington Times*

Summary Report

A roundtable on “North Korea in its Third Generation of Leadership: Prospects for the Future,” sponsored by the UPF Office of Peace and Security Affairs, Washington, DC, was held on May 23. Dr. Antonio Betancourt, Director of the UPF Office of Peace and Security Affairs, Washington, DC Office, served as moderator. The program was “not-for-attribution” at the request of the seven participants in order to have a more open and in-depth discussion. The participants were all leading North Korea and China analysts in the Washington area. Also participating were Dr. Mark P. Barry, Advisor to UPF’s Office of Peace and Security (via Skype), and Dr. William Selig, Deputy Director, Office of Peace and Security Affairs, UPF.

Moderator’s Opening Remarks:

We convened our first UPF Office of Peace and Security roundtable on December 14, 2011, on the topic of “Regional Perspectives of the Korean Peninsula after the November Asian Summits.” Little did we realize that three days later, Kim Jong Il would pass away. Moreover, UPF’s Chairman, Dr. Hyung Jin Moon, had just returned from a week-long trip to Pyongyang on December 16, commemorating the 20th anniversary of his parents’ meeting with President Kim Il Sung. He was fortunate to be invited to Kim Jong Il’s funeral to represent his parents, which he attended from December 26-29 along with Dr. Douglas Joo, the Chairman of *The Washington Times*. They were one of only three groups invited from the South, the other two being Madam Lee Hee-ho, widow of President Kim Dae-jung, and Hyundai Group chairwoman Madam Hyun Jeong-eun. UPF’s representatives persuaded the ROK (Republic of Korea) government to permit the three delegations to enter the North via crossing the DMZ.

UPF felt it appropriate to convene a follow-up to last December’s meeting because Kim Jong Un has been in leadership for the past five months. Enough has occurred in this period to begin to assess his leadership, the state of DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) relations with the outgoing Lee Myung-bak government, and sift through what happened leading up to the “Leap Day Deal” with the U.S. and its abrogation with the unsuccessful North Korean missile launch in mid-April. We also wanted to explore whether there are signs of a new Obama policy in the making that might encourage controlled or meaningful reforms in the DPRK.

Discussion

Assess the first five months of Kim Jong Un’s leadership since the death of his father, Kim Jong Il. To what extent is power shared with his aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, and uncle, Jang Song-taek? After last month’s party and military reorganizations, is power shifting from the military back towards the Korean Worker’s Party?

There was general agreement that the succession is over. It is a sensitive time in North Korea and uncertainty generates risks but also opportunities. Kim Jong Un has consolidated his power, but there has

been a dramatic overhaul of the legacy government he had inherited. The scope and speed of the overhaul has been remarkable, especially in contrast to Kim Jong Il's succession of his father.

In the five months Kim Jong Un has been in power, no one expected to see as many changes in terms of leadership, personalities, ideological development, and policy innovation. The frame of reference is that when Kim Il Sung passed away in 1994, the country was virtually in a "coma" until late 1997. Only after three years of mourning did Kim Jong Il begin to take on his public duties as the new leader.

Recently while everyone was focused on North Korea's failed April 13 missile launch and the increasingly inflammatory criticism against South Korea thereafter, major changes were occurring behind the scenes: the entire national security team and one third of the economic team had been replaced by April 11.

Why did it happen? On March 26, many of these ministers had gathered to observe the end of the 100-day mourning period following the death of Kim Jong Il, but in the last six weeks, there has been a dramatic overhaul of Kim Jong Il's legacy government: even 5 of the 7 people accompanying Kim Jong Il's hearse at his funeral have lost power or influence.

There are several hypotheses why there has been such a dramatic overhaul of the team that Kim Jong Un inherited, although we do not know which might be correct. All we know is that there are signs of something going on; but it is legitimate to ask, "Who governs North Korea?"

Any of three explanations may be possible:

- The mainstream idea is that the succession is over. Kim Jong Un feels confident and comfortable with the people around him. Whoever he didn't like has now been removed and replaced. The assumption is he is in total control.
- If he is only in partial control, then he is either being manipulated and sharing his power intentionally or he is being controlled whether or not he is aware of it. This would certainly represent a major departure from the past. Kim Jong Il never allowed anyone to consolidate so much power other than himself. If he is being manipulated, then by whom?
- Kim Jong Un is but a figurehead leader who is presiding over emerging groups of officials that may later form into factions. He has received all the necessary titles that the state can bestow, and so as far as the public is concerned, he is qualified to be the leader and there are no challenges to his legitimacy.

The moderator pointed out that Kim Jong Il had a very complex mind and was a perfectionist, contrary to how he was portrayed by US and South Korean intelligence. There is a strong feeling that Kim Jong Il simply would not have made a detailed plan for his succession beforehand and clearly laid out his wishes. North Korea refers to an October 8, 2011 conversation that Kim Jong Il reportedly had with certain officials that they regard as an element of his will, although this is subject to interpretation.

While Kim Jong Il received total support and trust from his father, he was not sure if Kim Jong Un was qualified and could stand up to the inevitable resistance. Kim Jong Un understood his father's hesitancy, and essentially had to grab the position in the final weeks, which raises questions about his filial piety. In other words, it was the system that enthroned him, not his father. The system empowered him for the sake of its own survival, but the essential question remains: Who governs North Korea today?

Is the North Korean regime stable, or does its behavior this year indicate underlying instability? Is U.S. and ROK policy based on a presumption more of stability or instability? How has ideology possibly

changed in the North since last December?

Participants agreed that the regime is stable, but it also has the quality of a royal court that makes governing very problematic. Kim Jong Un has his two brothers (one living in China who could be seen as a “loose cannon”) and a sister, as well as his aunt and uncle. The moderator said that based on his 17 trips to North Korea that the two key people are Kim Jong Un and his aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, the closest blood relatives to Kim Jong Il.

There was discussion about the May 8 capture of Chinese fishermen by North Koreans demanding “ransom” and holding them captive for 13 days. The Chinese public is upset about the fishermen’s humiliating treatment. Does this aggressive behavior represent a rogue element within the Kim Jong Un regime? Another pointed out that what was important is not public opinion but what the Chinese government thinks. Chinese official media has played down the controversy. It won’t affect relations between Beijing and Pyongyang. China provides North Korea with most of its fuel, food, and foreign investment. Regarding the fishermen incident, not all the facts were revealed. An expert felt that the Chinese fishermen are not innocent. They likely were caught poaching in North Korean territory’s waters without a license. When North Korea demanded license fees, the Chinese called it a ransom. What’s interesting is how the issue was resolved. If it was in South Korea, according to the expert, they would still be in jail; however, in the North Korean case, everyone was back home in 10 days; the message being – the way to deal with North Korea is different and involves a different set of tactics. This was a propaganda battle.

Are there indications that the DPRK may attempt to move forward with modest economic measures that could reduce dependence on a centralized economy and permit more individual initiative? Is the North’s dependence on Chinese aid and investment increasing or decreasing? What significance is there to Supreme People’s Assembly Presidium Chairman Kim Yong Nam’s recent trip to Singapore and Indonesia?

On April 15, Kim Jong Un said: “It is the Party’s steadfast intention to ensure that the people will never have to tighten their belt again.” Jang Song Taek, Kim Jong Il’s brother-in-law, serves as the most senior North Korean representative in the joint committee with China that oversees the development of two special economic zones. It’s important to note that the special economic zones are for countries other than China and Russia. China remains North Korea’s chief trading partner, but Beijing would like to pressure North Korea to launch economic reforms that would reduce their reliance on hand-outs and humanitarian aid.

In this regard, the recent trip (May 11-18) of Kim Yong Nam to Singapore and Indonesia was very significant if those nations can serve as an economic model for North Korea and to drum up foreign investment and build economic partnerships with its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Trade and investment between North Korea and Southeast Asia has waxed and waned over the past 12 years. From 2000 to 2006, trade with 11 Southeast Asian countries — including Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand — accounted for 10 to 12 percent of North Korea’s foreign trade. But after Singapore and others pledged to enforce U.N. sanctions, trade with the region dropped to less than 2 percent in 2010, according to the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy in Seoul.

North Korea has sought to reverse that trend. In 2010, Singapore was North Korea’s sixth-largest trade partner, according to the Korea Trade Investment Promotion Agency in Seoul. And in recent years, North Korea has developed two special economic zones, in Rason in the northeast and Hwanggumphyong Island in the northwest, and is looking to Singapore for advice, analysts said.

How meaningful was the recent publication by InterMedia of its report, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment" in terms of the ongoing influence of foreign media inside the North? What "genies" are now "out of the bottle"?

North Korea's New Year's editorial was described as alarming: it detailed an economy in desperate shape. The top priority, it said, was to solve the food crisis for the 20th year in a row, which is not exactly in line with goal upon the 100th anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth of a "strong and prosperous country."

"Advanced media technologies such as mobile phones, computers, MP3 players, and USB drives have begun to make their way into North Korea in substantial numbers, particularly among the elites," said the InterMedia study. Many of the devices are smuggled in from China, whose low-cost televisions, DVD players, and other equipment have helped the spread of foreign information. Perhaps the InterMedia report, funded by the State Department, said more about us than objective changes in North Korea.

Cell phones were introduced to North Korea in November 2002, but in 2004, the government changed its mind and mobile phones were banned. Some believe that the experiment came to a sudden halt because a cell phone was used to detonate a huge bomb at a train station that nearly killed Kim Jong Il (April 22, 2004) returning from China. In December 2008, a mobile phone service was re-launched; however, no mobile phones can dial into or out of the country, nor is there an Internet connection. While the cell phone played an integral part in social changes in China and Egypt, the experts believe that the North Korean regime has recalculated what are threats to its core interests and has decided that some risks are now acceptable, such as in the economic realm or in the spreading use of cellphones whose conversations cannot all be monitored.

In terms of "genies" "out of the bottle," Kim Jong Un gave one of three major speeches this year on protecting the environment as a civic duty. There were many traditional issues he could have talked about, but he chose environmental protection. Will he be the first "green" leader of North Korea? This may translate into cutting down high-polluting factories and looking for other power sources.

The Chinese are anxious about North Korea — they don't want their influence with it to be marginalized. Will Kim Jong Un relate in a different manner to China than the previous regime? The Chinese have always given unconditional support to North Korea, but with the recent detention of Chinese fishing boats and the failure by Pyongyang to inform China about the rocket launch, China is not feeling the same level of confidence with Kim Jong Un as it did with Kim Jong Il. The Chinese are keeping their distance because they know how difficult North Korea can be. The Chinese have been working through several channels to get Kim Jong Un to come for a visit, which may or may not occur this year. In fact, he may choose to visit another country first, such as Indonesia.

China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, voted to condemn the rocket launch. "The Security Council demands that the DPRK not proceed with any further launches using ballistic missile technology" and suspend "all activities related to its ballistic missile program," said the statement. Meanwhile, satellite imagery has shown new tunnel-digging at a North Korean nuclear test site in possible preparation for a third test of a nuclear device. (A first test occurred on October 9, 2006, and a second test was conducted on May 25, 2009.)

China and North Korea have a very special relationship beginning with China's cultural influence, particularly Buddhist beliefs and Confucian ideals which are part of Korea's heritage. Also, its military influence can't be overlooked. China supplied enormous human resources and military assistance during the Korean War. Economically, China provides humanitarian aid and remains North Korea's largest trading partner. China will continue to apply pressure in its relations with North Korea, but with the US increasing its influence in Burma, India, and the Philippines, the Chinese feel "scared," according to the

China specialist. China is treading softly with North Korea because they still don't know Kim Jong Un. The element of unpredictability is too high.

Does North Korea's current vilification of Lee Myung-bak (e.g., through the "cartoon war," etc.) portend imminent provocations against the South? What are the implications of President Obama's March 26th speech at Hankuk University in Seoul for future American policy towards the Korean peninsula?

The real important issue is with Kim Jong Un. He is still a mystery. Will he move in the same direction as his father? Will there be continuity? South Korea will have presidential elections on December 19. Elections for the National Assembly were held April 11. The conservative party leader Park Geun-hye (daughter of Park Chung-hee, president of South Korea from 1961 to 1979) emerged as the leading candidate to replace Lee Myung-bak in the Blue House. In contrast to Lee's position, Park and her conservative *Saenuri* (New Frontier) Party advocate somewhat more engagement with the North than occurs at present. The experts believe that North Korea would prefer a presidential victory by a coalition of the liberal and progressive parties, who have strong connections with the Korean trade unions.

North Korea's vilification campaign against the Lee Myung-bak government in the South is aimed at preventing the conservatives from winning December's presidential election. The North is trying to scare conservatives, hoping the liberal and progressive parties will unite and garner more votes in aggregate than the conservatives. North Korea, at minimum, wants unconditional food aid from the South, which will be harder to obtain from a conservative ROK administration.

What is the current situation concerning the human trafficking industry in North Korea and China?

A great deal of international media and political focus is placed on North Korea's nuclear arms development rather than human rights issues that force thousands of refugees out of North Korea and into the hands of human traffickers in China. An estimated 80 percent of North Korean defectors who flee to China are women, and among those, a staggering 90 percent are victims of the human trafficking industry. The Chinese government's policy is to arrest and deport all refugees from North Korea, claiming they are "illegal economic migrants" rather than seekers of political asylum. As a result, refugees in China must remain hidden in fear of facing severe punishment or death upon their repatriation to North Korea. This lack of individual security makes North Korean refugees in China easy targets for traffickers. Women refugees are commonly promised work in China and then tricked and sold to brothels or locked in a room and forced to perform sexual acts in front of a camera. Others are sold to local men as brides. As long as China continues to defy its participation in the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and repatriate North Korean escapees and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees allows them to do so, rampant trafficking of North Koreans in China will continue.

In the face of a possible third DPRK nuclear test, the U.S. should call for a renegotiation of the Leap Day Deal, and try to amend and strengthen the abrogated agreement in various ways, linking it more to International Atomic Energy Agency inspections and the Six Party Talks.

There is an element of time that is important. The truthfulness of Kim Jong Un's character has to come through soon. If there is no third nuclear test, or another missile launch, or some bold statement, then sooner or later, the international community will ask the question, "Where is the follow-up?" People will wonder whether Kim Jong Un is a paper tiger. Once that notion of a paper tiger is formed, just like the widespread image of a beggar state, it is impossible to erase.

It is at best premature to consider whether the Obama administration should send a senior envoy to the North. The U.S. prefers continuity, and no one in the Administration is willing to undertake the battles (interagency, with Congress and possibly with the ROK government) that would be entailed if the U.S.

tried to implement a more creative policy of engagement with the North. Ideas out of a second term Obama administration regarding the North are not likely to be large.

The conference ended with an off-the-record discussion of the value of holding a conference in Washington this fall on ending the Korean War, which would be attended by Korean War veterans, policy analysts, and members of the diplomatic community.