

Kim Jong-un's Choice and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

May 2, 2012

Interviewee

Sung-bae Kim

On the eve of North Korea's official celebrations for the centenary of Kim Il-Sung's birth on April 15, 2012, Kim Jong-un assumed two important posts; First Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party and First Chairman of the National Defense Commission. As Kim Jong-un solidifies his leadership, Dr. Sungbae Kim of the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS) discussed on the implications of this process and offered prospects for North Korea's domestic and foreign policies. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from the interview.

Q1: What has been the outcome of the recent party and state meetings?

A1: "Kim Jong-un has assumed the position of supreme leader far more quickly than Kim Jong-il did as he has successfully stabilized his power base through a generational shift of key positions and has maintained regime stability."

- Kim Jong-un, who was only supreme commander of the Korean People's Army (KPA), became the supreme leader of the country as he assumed titles of First Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea (appointed on April 11, at the 4th Party Conference) and the First Chairman of the National Defense Commission of North Korea (appointed on April 13, at the 5th session at the 12th Supreme People's Assembly). In order to hold power, he must take over the chain of command, as institutional inertia acts upon any regime. The recent Party Conference and Supreme People's Assembly show that Kim Jong-un has now completed his power succession. In particular, this succession process has been carried out very swiftly when compared to that of his father Kim Jong-il. Although Kim Jong-il exercised power as the General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and Chairman of the National Defense Commission following the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, he only became the official head of state after the National Defense Commission chairmanship was declared to be the highest post of the state with the constitutional amendment in 1998. By contrast, Kim Jong-un became the supreme leader three months after Kim Jong-il's death.
- It seems that the power base of Kim Jong-un and his uncle and key supporter Jang Song Thaek has been strengthened with a generational shift in personnel changes, which took place at the Party Conference and Supreme People's Assembly. Former Minister of People's Armed Forces Vice-Marshal Kim Yong-chun, who was among the eight people to walk alongside the hearse at Kim Jong-il's funeral, was recently replaced by Kim Jong-gak, who

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

The East Asia Institute
909 Sampoong B/D
158 Euljiro Jung-gu
Seoul 100-786
Republic of Korea

© EAI 2012

www.eai.or.kr

was formerly First Vice-Director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA. Kim Won-hong, formerly head of the Military Security Command was chosen to be Minister of the State Security Department filling the 20-year vacant post and replacing General U Tong Chuk, Senior Deputy Director at the State Security Department. Another important move has been with Vice Marshal Choe Ryong-hae, who is closely linked to Jang Song Thaek. He was appointed to be the Director of the KPA General Political Bureau and was also promoted to serve as Presidium Standing Member of the Politburo, and as Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission. General Ri Myong Su, who was promoted as Minister of People's Security and is also known to have close ties to Jang Song Thaek. Such changes in the party and military signify the strengthening of the Jang Song Thaek circle, the guardian group of Kim Jong-un, and ultimately, the reinforcement of Kim Jong-un's power base.

- As the Kim Jong-un regime has successfully strengthened its power base through the Party Conference and the Supreme People's Assembly, it is expected to remain stable for the short term, despite the recent satellite launch failure and the growing confrontation with the international community.

Q2: What are the prospects for North Korea's domestic and foreign policies following these promotions?

A2-1: "North Korea's domestic policy will follow the military-first ideology in the short term, but will eventually transform into an economy-first policy in the long term."

- On the domestic front, the Kim Jong-un regime has no choice but to maintain Kim Jong-il's policies due to the hereditary nature of the political system. Moreover, during this period of power transition it is very difficult to make rapid changes. In the long term, though, change will be inevitable for the following two reasons.
- Firstly, domestic factors in North Korea's economy have a strong influence. The reason for North Korea's economic growth during 2003 and 2008 was not a result of the military-first politics' economic strategy but the economic measures launched on July 1, 2002 and opening of official markets in 2003. The centrally planned economic system and private markets already coexist in North Korea, and the citizens will resist efforts by the regime to further control the markets.
- Secondly, Kim Jong-un must focus on establishing an economic power, as he needs to complete Kim Jong-il's declaration to establish a "strong and prosperous nation." Since 2010, North Korea has published New Year Joint Editorials that placed great emphasis on light industries and enhancing living conditions, making a shift from the narrow focus on the military-first politics. In particular, the 2012 New Year Joint Editorial has stressed the importance of knowledge and technology-based economy as it put forth a model for an "Industrial Revolution in the New Century." For the short-term, the Kim Jong-un regime is expected to follow both the military-first policies as well as the ideas of an "Industrial Revolution in the New Century." This will gradually change with more emphasis on the economy.

A2-2: "North Korea's foreign policy will maintain its hard line position now, but will enter negotiations in the long term."

- In the long term, negotiations will be a greater focus for the Kim Jong-un regime's foreign policy. From the beginning, the Kim Jong-un regime sent a confused message as it reached the Leap Day Deal with the United States and then

attempted to launch a satellite. Such mixed signals indicate that the Kim Jong-un regime has yet to decide on a course for North Korea's foreign policy. However, the satellite launch was driven by the domestic political factors rather than by its foreign policy. This does not suggest that the Kim Jong-un regime will take a hard line in its foreign relations in the future. The following are the reasons why the Kim Jong-un regime is bound to adopt a negotiation strategy in the future.

- First, it is essential for the Kim Jong-un regime to ensure stability in foreign affairs in order to stabilize its power base at home. In particular, nuclear negotiations involving major powers such as the United States can help provide the new regime with diplomatic recognition.
- Second, the Kim Jong-un regime cannot afford to neglect its relations with China. Until now, Beijing's focus on peaceful development and Pyongyang's military-first politics have been incongruous. The unexpected swiftness in China's approval of the United Nations Security Council's Presidential Statement following the 2012 satellite launch seems to be a strong warning that it will not always provide aid to North Korea while tolerating such actions in the future. It will become increasingly more difficult for North Korea to defy China as it will place more pressure on the Kim Jong-un regime so as to limit the options in carrying out more provocative actions.
- Third, the Kim Jong-un regime is pursuing the leadership style of Kim Il-sung rather than that of Kim Jong-il. Consequently, it will seek to follow Kim Il-sung's model of equidistant diplomacy which places emphasis on the concept of *juche* or "self-reliance" in foreign policy. North Korea needs to overcome its excessive dependence on China and will therefore naturally seek to approach the United States and Russia. Kim Jong-un can use nuclear negotiations as a weapon in his pursuit of equidistant diplomatic relations between the U.S.-China, China-Russia, and China-South Korea.
- Fourth, foreign aid is indispensable for the survival of the Kim Jong-un regime. There needs to be a stable supply of food, energy, and capital investment in order to overcome the severe shortage of resources in North Korea. This will contribute toward developing light industries and improving living conditions. In the interest of fulfilling these goals, North Korea must give up its nuclear program and place a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests in exchange for foreign aid and participating in negotiations.

Q3. What role can the South Korean government play in this regard?

A3: "The strained relations between South Korea and North Korea will continue for the time being. The South Korean government must carefully manage the situation and take this as an opportunity to reinforce policy coordination with its neighbors."

- Inter-Korea relations will continue to be strained for the time being. The Kim Jong-un regime's hard line policy toward South Korea will not let up as the new leader cannot appear to be soft on dealing with South Korea. It will also be difficult to resume the Six-Party Talks due to the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement condemning the recent satellite launch.

- The Lee administration in South Korea must work to prevent the current situation from becoming worse rather than fulfill its ambition to develop its relationship with North Korea. Simultaneously, Seoul needs to improve policy coordination with neighboring countries concerning North Korean issues. This is achievable because all neighboring countries, including China and Russia share the same view that North Korea must transform from its military-first politics to an economy-first system through denuclearization. Moreover, when the Six-Party Talks resume, major issues such as a peace regime for the Korean Peninsula, U.S.-DPRK relations, and the normalization of Japan-DPRK relations will all be simultaneously discussed along with the nuclear issue. Therefore, it is crucial for South Korea to coordinate policies on North Korea and the future of the Korean Peninsula with neighboring countries in advance. Now is the perfect opportunity for policy coordination, as the satellite launch has created an atmosphere of international cooperation and shed more light on the need for a collective response.
- In the year 2012, leadership transitions will be taking place simultaneously in Northeast Asia. During this period of transition, countries are likely to experience policy delays. In this respect, it is important for South Korea to work closely with neighboring countries to help transfer policies from the current Lee administration to the next administration and also minimize policy delays or even the emergence of a policy vacuum.

About the Interviewee

Sung-bae Kim

Dr. Sung-bae Kim earned his Ph.D degree in Political Science at Seoul National University. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), where he provides advice to the government and contributes to the development of national security strategy and policy on North Korea.