

EAI  
Commentary  
No. 12

EAI Security Net

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## A Path Never Taken: The Options for Kim Jong-un and the Future of the Korean Peninsula

October 19, 2010

Since Kim Jong-il's health deteriorated in the summer of 2008, the question of his succession has drawn attention from all over the world. Finally, on September 28 2010, Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's third son, rapidly emerged with his guardianship group made up of the close personnel of the "dear leader" at the Third Meeting of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) Representatives. The future direction of the succession process has generated tremendous interest from all over the world, because it is not only related to internal power transition in North Korea but also directly linked with the future of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. The political and diplomatic decisions of Kim Jong-il's successor will crucially affect his own future, as well that of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis, Inter-Korean relations, and the international order of Northeast Asia.

Kim Jong-un was promoted to the rank of *daechang*, the equivalent of a four-star general, and appointed vice chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission, in essence holding the de facto post of second-in-command. He was named right after the four members of the politburo standing committee by North Korea's official news agency, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), and his picture was revealed to the public for the first time. This formulated that he became the successor to his father. All in all, he was named as general on the 27<sup>th</sup>, appointed vice chairman of the party's Central Military Commission on the 28<sup>th</sup>, and his picture released on the 29<sup>th</sup>,

which shows precisely the elaborated staging and even hastiness on the part of the North Korean regime. On October 10, Kim Jong-il effectively declared his heir apparent at home and abroad when he attended a massive military parade with Kim Jong-un, commemorating the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Workers Party of Korea. This remarkable event was broadcasted live in North Korea with even foreign correspondents invited to attend. The succession process was a lot faster than expected, particularly when compared to Kim Jong-il, whose succession process only got off the ground six years after he was designated a member of the Politburo in 1974.

It is premature to say which direction Kim Jong-un will go, but it cannot but be seen that his emergence puts more emphasis on 'continuation' rather than 'severance' or 'transformation' from the existing *songun* or military-first politics. Above all, it is noteworthy that Kim Jong-un took the position of vice chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission rather than positions within its Politburo or Secretariat. This is groundwork to make Kim Jong-un become the "royal" successor of the military-first politics system. Like his father, he will likely exercise the power to interpret the ruling ideology as the sole successor to the "bloodline of Mount Baekdu."<sup>1</sup> Holding onto the banner of military-first politics, Kim Jong-un will establish it as a

<sup>1</sup> Mount Baekdu is the official birthplace of Kim Jong-il.

*“...as long as the military-first politics is sustained, it is almost impossible for North Korea to pursue the path to economic recovery by itself.”*

“revolutionary” tradition that will form the basis of his succession. Secondly, it is also noticeable that Kim Jong-un’s guardianship group is filled with his father’s people. They were appointed to be heavyweights in the Party and military during the Meeting of Party Representatives. Kim Jong-il’s sister Kim Kyong-hui became a member of the Politburo, her husband Jang Song Thaek became an alternate member of the Politburo, member of the Central Military Commission, and a department director of the Party’s Central Committee, while Vice-Marshal Ri Yong Ho became a Standing Member of the Politburo and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. It is hard to find anyone that could be considered as Kim Jong-un’s people, which is to be understood considering his age and inexperience.

There is a dilemma for Kim Jong-un in that he cannot completely rely on the military-first politics. Currently, Kim has not even been officially designated as successor; that will only come when he assumes position as a Standing Member of the Politburo. Such a move can only be possible if he accumulates considerable achievements as he has nothing to his name so far. Presumably, this process needs to be completed before the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012, leaving Kim Jong-un with little time. Establishing North Korea as an ‘economically strong power,’ one of the three pillars of *gangseongdaeguk* or strong and prosperous country is something that has yet to be achieved. Pyongyang has already claimed to have achieved the other two pillars of a strong political power and a strong military power. However, as long as the military-first politics is sustained, it is almost impossible for North Korea to pursue the path to economic recovery by itself.

Increased Chinese influence is another structural factor that limits Kim Jong-un’s options. Kim Jong-il visited China twice in March and August, 2010 within three months. Emphasizing a “historical mission to hand over the baton of the traditional friendship of the two countries to the next generation smoothly,” Kim asked for Chinese support in his August visit for the succession process.<sup>2</sup> This is typical behavior more in common with a kingdom in the traditional East Asian regional order where leaders used the tribute-investiture system with China to compensate for the lack of domestic legitimacy. However, increased dependence on China places pressure on North Korea to change its military-first politics and to take on a policy of ‘reform and opening.’ For example, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said China will “support the DPRK for developing economy and improving people’s livelihood and is willing to introduce to the DPRK the experience of China’s reform and opening-up” when he met Kim Jong-il in May, 2010.<sup>3</sup> Chinese President Hu Jintao also mentioned in his congratulatory telegram for the September Meeting of Party Representatives that he “sincerely wish General Secretary Kim and the WPK to keep making new and greater achievements in the cause of leading the DPRK people building a strong

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<sup>2</sup> *Bloomberg*, “Kim Jong Il, Facing Tighter U.S. Sanctions, Extols China’s Economic Gains,” August 31, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-08-30/north-korea-confirms-kim-s-visit-to-china-desire-for-nuclear-arms-talks.html> (Accessed October 15, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *Xinhua*, “Chinese Premier Meets Kim Jong-il,” May 7, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-05/07/c\\_13281720.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-05/07/c_13281720.htm) (Accessed October 15, 2010)

*“As Kim Jong-il’s succession process finalizes, sooner or later attempts to resume the Six-Party Talk will be actively initiated by China.”*

and prosperous country.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, even though external Chinese support is indispensable for solidifying the succession process, it also presses North Korea internally to change its military-first politics, subsequently forming a conflicting structure. Recent efforts by North Korea to restart family reunions, working-level military talks, and pursue new approaches to South Korea and the United States reflect this situation. Of course, North Korea is trying to secure economic support from South Korea and the United States in order to overcome its current economic difficulties, but those actions can also be seen as an attempt to disperse the pressure for reforms and opening from China.

Kim Jong-un does not have many options left under the structural dilemma in which he has to ‘inherit’ the military-first politics as the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of heredity succession, yet also has to embrace ‘change’ in order to revitalize a decaying economy. North Korea naturally favors the option in which it receives economic support from China and South Korea while possessing nuclear weapons and preserves its regime security. However, this move could hardly be accepted by the neighboring countries who will not buy the same horse twice. Considering his dilemma, Kim Jong-un has really only two options. One is to ignore the pressure of change and be bound by the military-first politics that will lead onto the road of another “Arduous March” of famine and economic decline, following his father’s way. While this path may sustain the North Korean regime for some time, it will eventually face a

matter of life or death. Without external support, the North Korean economy will only become worse, leaving Kim Jong-un, whose political ground is not firm enough, in a rather vulnerable position.

The other option is to take the path of *sunkyung* or economy-first politics and embrace a policy of ‘reform and opening’ based on denuclearization and a peace agreement. So long as Kim Jong-un sticks to the military-first politics, it will be hard to see how North Korea can build a favorable international environment that facilitates regime stability and draws in external capital flow to allow for economic growth. Internally, the military-first politics that places a priority on the defense industry not only causes revenue deficiency but also leads to inefficiency in the use of resources. Without any momentum toward economy-first politics of ‘reform and opening,’ North Korea can hardly survive under such distorted priorities. It is understandable that during the transition period it will be hard to take on a new approach; however Kim Jong-un has to consider carefully the right path for the future of North Korea’s advancement.

The first step needs to be taken forward with regard to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis. As Kim Jong-il’s succession process finalizes, sooner or later attempts to resume the Six-Party Talks will likely to be actively initiated by China. Pyongyang’s decision on this matter will ultimately be the litmus test for its future. North Korea will no longer be able to obtain external support for its succession process by just simply attending the Talks. Looking back at the final period of Kim Il-sung’s rule where Kim Jong-il took charge of nuclear negotiations, it can be expected that Kim Jong-un too will take on some responsibility in the current nuclear negotiations.

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<sup>4</sup>*Reuters*, “China congratulates North Korea on party meeting,” September 29, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUKTOE68S00E20100929> (Accessed October 15, 2010).

*“Neighboring states need to assure Pyongyang that if it pursues peace without nuclear weapons and military threats, not only will North Korea survive, but also it will receive full support and be able to enter on the path of reform and development in the long term.”*

North Korea’s nuclear capability is the greatest legacy that Kim Jong-il could leave to his son. The challenge though is how to make the most of it. Kim Jong-un needs to demonstrate his wisdom to resolve both the problems of regime security and economic revival through negotiations. For that, sincerity is required on the negotiating table. Specific plans need to be devised in order to move away from the current deadlock, to revive the progress in nuclear negotiations that has lost its momentum between ‘disablement’ phase and ‘dismantlement’ phase due to the issues of report and verification. Kim Jong-un needs to make a determined strategic choice to pursue a denuclearized comprehensive peace agreement on the basis that nuclear weapons will no longer be the guarantor for the survival of North Korea. The concept of a peace agreement should not be abused as an instrument for short-term interests, but be utilized as a steppingstone to obtain internal backing and external security guarantees. North Korea by itself needs to cast a net that will comprehensively interweave China, South Korea, and the United States. This can be the only way to guarantee the survival of a peaceful North Korea.

Along with North Korea’s strategic resolve, South Korea and all parties concerned need to ‘co-evolve’ and try to approach this problem in a different way. The existence of a declining North Korea already obstructs peace, stability, and prosperity in Northeast Asia. But when it descends into a failed state, all of the neighboring states will have to share a tremendous burden. The collapse of the North Korean regime will not meet the strategic interests of any country like South Korea or China, but would only create a ‘structural hole’ in North East Asia and the world. In order for

Kim Jong-un to choose the right path, all parties concerned need to evolve their North Korea policies. They should take on the role of a lighthouse-keeper so that Kim Jong-il’s succession process transforms the current emphasis on the military-first politics to a focus on denuclearization and reform. In this regard, the most important thing is to propose a peace plan that allows for alternatives that Kim Jong-un can choose instead of pursuing nuclear weapons. Comprehensive security guarantees will be required, for example, an inter-Korean peace treaty and a U.S.-North Korea peace treaty that are both supported by China. As long as Kim Jong-un feels insecure concerning the survival of the regime and the nation, he will never give up nuclear weapons that he might believe are the last bastion for North Korea. Neighboring states need to assure Pyongyang that if it pursues peace without nuclear weapons and military threats, not only will North Korea survive, but also it will receive full support and be able to enter the path of reform and development in the long term. When the neighboring states consider North Korea as part of the future of Northeast Asia and show interest in the alternatives that Pyongyang can pursue as a normal state, this will then be taken by the North as a necessary signal for their survival. In the end, it must be made clear to North Korea that it cannot pursue economic development while continuing to possess nuclear weapons and persisting with military-first politics. To this end, comprehensive measures that incorporates both incentive and pressure needs to be developed.

Strategic cooperation between South Korea and China regarding the succession process is also important. The subtle diplomatic competition and tension following the *Cheonan* Incident should not reappear when

dealing with the succession issue. Without a strategic consensus on the future of North Korea, all the contingencies on the North will cause conflict and make collaboration more difficult between the two countries. Additionally, if competition over leverage toward North Korea continues between the two, it would only be exploited by Pyongyang to prolong military-first politics resulting in an undesirable outcome for both Beijing and Seoul. Based on a strategic consensus concerning the desired future for North Korea, South Korea and China must prepare a joint strategy which

expedites the internal transformation of North Korea by making the most use of the North's external demands as soon as possible.■

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