



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Asia Programme Paper ASP PP 2011/09

North Korea's Leadership Transition: Stability rather than Chaos

John Swenson-Wright

Associate Fellow, Asia Programme

December 2011

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il was in the words of the international media, a 'game-changer', highlighting the difficulties of interpreting political events in North Korea. In the short-term, stability rather than chaos is the likely outcome for the peninsula.

North Korea's two days of closely choreographed commemoration following the death of Kim Jong-il, and the rapid anointing of Kim Jong-un as the new leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) suggests that the political elites are focused on what they have historically done best – maintaining both the institutions of power and demonstrating to their domestic population and outside countries the continuity and resilience of the State.

Kim Jong-un, given his inexperience and young age is superficially ill-equipped to manage the task of governing a nation beset by major economic, political and diplomatic challenges. Already, however, the DPRK public media has moved swiftly to dispel any suggestion that his leadership might be in question. The official obituary for his father explicitly referred to the new heir as the 'Leader of the Party, Military and the People'. From the relatively limited post of vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK), the young Kim has now been elevated to the lofty position of 'father of the people' and 'sun' – rhetorical contrivances that were frequently used in the past to describe both his father, Kim Jong-il, and his grandfather, Kim Il-sung.

The public ceremonies following Kim Jong-il's death have reinforced the image of a seamless and orderly succession from one generation to another. Kim Jong-un is the youngest of Kim Jong-il's three sons, and in a society where Confucian traditions of respect for age and seniority still apply, it would have been plausible to see the baton of political authority passing to the eldest son, Kim Jong-nam. However, the eldest Kim remains on the periphery of political power, both figuratively and literally, residing in Macao, where he appears to enjoy an expensive and high-quality lifestyle. Recent reports in the South Korean media have even suggested that he may be on the verge of defecting to Seoul in an effort either to guarantee his political safety, or to secure access to financial support that may now be conditional following the change of leadership in Pyongyang. The absence of any siblings at the state funeral, other than the heir-apparent, is a clear indication that publicly at least there are no rivals within the Kim family dynasty.

Institutional dynamics

Beyond the matter of who wields titular power in the DPRK are critical questions about the balance of political influence between the three core political institutions in the North: the Party, the Military and the State.

Both party and military figures were equally well represented at Kim Jong-il's funeral. Key amongst these was Jang Song-thaek, vice-chairman of the influential National Defence Commission, and Ri Yong-ho, Chief of Staff of the Army. In his last few years in power Kim Jong-il appears to have been seeking to bolster the power of the Party as a counterweight to a military that saw its authority grow in the 1990s thanks to the 'military-first' (or 'songun') strategy of the government and, most dramatically, following the North's successful nuclear weapons tests of 2006 and 2009. Jang's power, at least until very recently, has been strictly concentrated in the civilian sector but his prominent position in the funeral cortege may be a sign that the party's influence has risen relative to that of the military.

Economic policy

Jang Song-thaek, as potentially the most senior-member of the older generation close to Kim Jong-un, may be an influential voice in favour of economic liberalization and greater openness. Reports suggest that he is a keen supporter of establishing a special economic zone in Sinuiju, on the border with China. Moreover, there are indications that some in the Chinese leadership see Jang as a constructive voice for reforms of a type that echo the modernization that the Chinese economy went through in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yet, much will depend on the attitude of members of the wider Pyongyang elite - not only the traditional power brokers, but also the younger generation of individuals who have both a stake in the existing political system, but also have a wider awareness of the outside world than the old elite. Anecdotal accounts from Western non-governmental groups, particularly in the educational sector, suggest that the children of the DPRK's political elites increasingly see training in business, and the possibility of access to Western-education as the preferred route for personal advancement rather than a traditional career in institutional politics.

Policy prognosis

It seems fair to assume in the next few months the new leadership will be preoccupied with consolidating and stabilizing power. Part of this will involve sending clear signals that the government and the country are militarily secure. For this reason it is no surprise that official statements have been quick to stress the North's nuclear programme as a central aspect of Kim Jong-il's legacy. It is unlikely that the new leadership will move to dismantle the DPRK's nuclear deterrent or to suddenly re-engage with the Six Party Talks' process.

Where foreign policy is concerned, and specifically relations with the South, the DPRK has sent mixed signals. The North recently announced that it 'will have no dealing with the Lee Myung-bak group of traitors forever.' A few days earlier, in discussions with two prominent South Korean visitors to the North, the North suggested that it would welcome the resumption of humanitarian and economic assistance from the South and re-affirmed its support for two key past North-South agreements.

At the heart of this pitch may be an awareness of the pressures of electoral politics in the South. The Republic of Korea (ROK) President, Lee Myung-bak is limited to one term in office and with presidential elections scheduled for 2012, the North knows that it is in its interest to play a waiting game in the hope of a new South Korea president more amenable to the idea of engagement.

External responses

How should the outside world react to the new leadership in the North? For now, the cautious diplomacy favoured by the United States and its regional allies seems the best way forward. The DPRK will remain hyper-sensitive to any perceived slights or departures from protocol.

Beyond public, declaratory statements, the US should continue to explore the idea of using foreign aid, specifically the idea of 'nutritional assistance' as a means of reopening the Six Party Nuclear Talks. In the week prior to the death of Kim Jong-il, there was the expectation that a deal was imminent between Washington and Pyongyang in which food would be exchanged in return for a suspension of the North's highly-enriched uranium programme, a missile testing moratorium, and the re-establishment of an international inspections process for the North's plutonium-based reactor at Yongbyon. It will be important to see if there is still an appetite in the North for this agreement.

China has arguably the most potential influence over the DPRK, given its provision of substantial amounts of economic and energy assistance to the North. For now, the Chinese leadership seems inclined to prioritize its public relations with the DPRK over its private coordination with other regional partners. No fewer than eight senior Chinese officials, including Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, and significantly Xi Jinping, the likely next president of the country, visited the DPRK embassy in Beijing formally to express their condolences to the North. Press reports in Seoul have suggested that the Lee administration was rebuffed by the Chinese when, shortly after Kim's death, the South Korean government sought to initiate direct consultation between Presidents Lee and Hu. Xi Jinping is due to visit Washington in January and this will provide a valuable opportunity for close coordination between senior US and Chinese officials.

Against this backdrop of internal power consolidation in the North, the policy of 'strategic patience' favoured by the Obama administration may continue to be the best – albeit frustratingly limited - policy option for the outside world. It offers the prospect of broader political and economic engagement with the North, while continuing to focus on finding a practical way of re-starting negotiations over the DPRK's nuclear capabilities.

The New Year is an opportunity for both the South Korean and North Korean governments to make public statements as part of their traditional New Year messages. Neither side is likely to offer bold initiatives, in part because domestic politics constrain the respective leaderships. For the North, the ceremonial timetable for the year ahead is likely to be especially important with key events scheduled to celebrate the birthday of Kim Jong-un on 8 January, that of Kim Jong-il on 16 February, and the centennial birthday of national founder Kim Il-sung on 15 April. Analysts will be watching closely to assess how these events are coordinated and to observe if there has been any significant shift in the leadership line-up.