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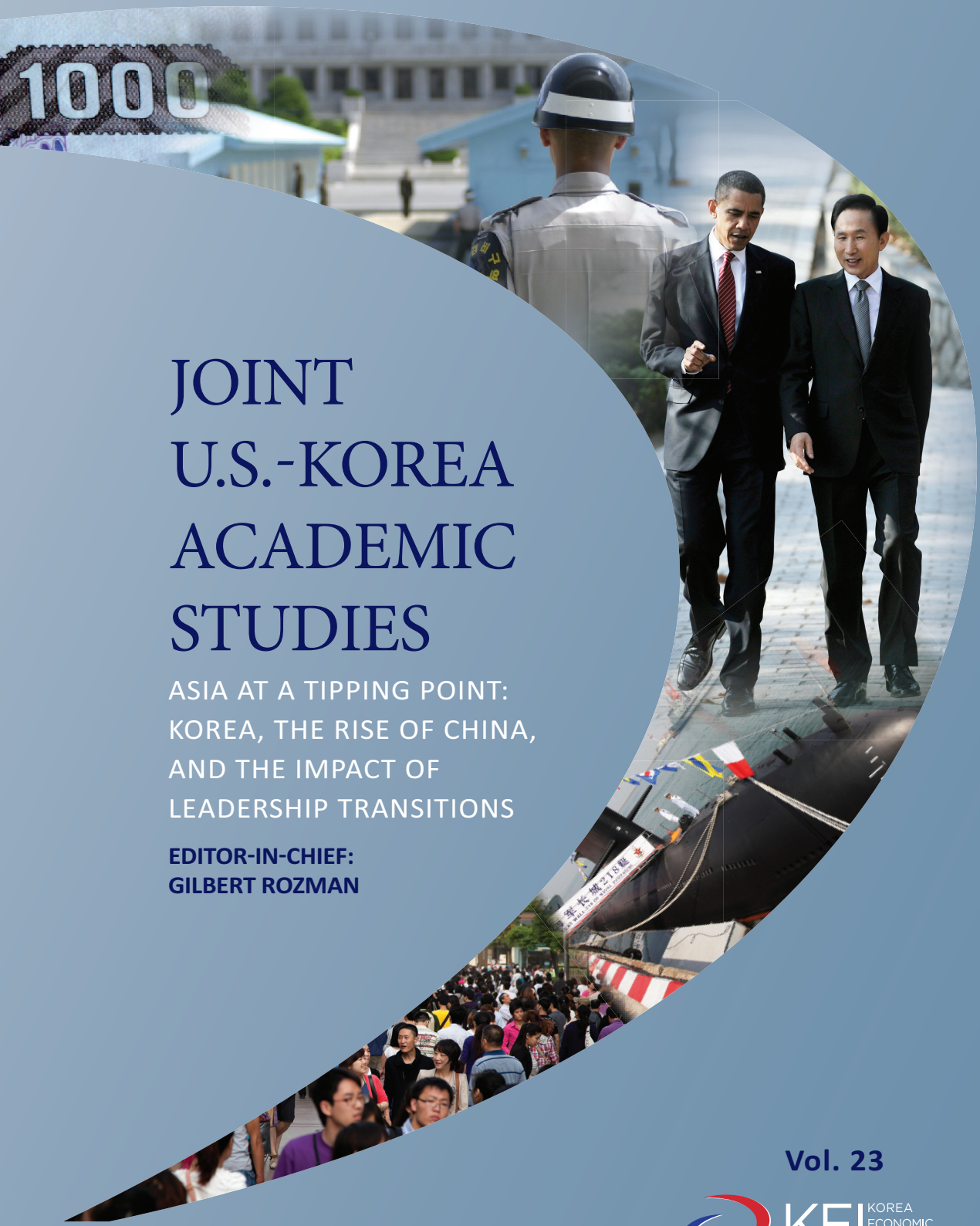

JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

ASIA AT A TIPPING POINT: KOREA, THE RISE OF CHINA, AND THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF:
GILBERT ROZMAN

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Editor-in Chief:
Gilbert Rozman, Princeton University

Political Change in 2010-2012 and Regional Cooperation Centered on the Korean Peninsula

North Korean Politics and China

JACK PRITCHARD and L. GORDON FLAKE

The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011 has prematurely set in motion the leadership changes that were anticipated in 2012. To be sure, a leadership change in North Korea in 2012 was not a given, but the transitional preparation that was begun in earnest in September 2010 with the naming of Kim's third son, Kim Jong-un, to a series of leadership positions as the designated successor was expected to continue in a serious vein. Kim Jong-un's arrival so early in 2012 restructures how the remainder of the anticipated leadership changes in Northeast Asia will be viewed. Instead of waiting to see how political transitions in China, South Korea, Russia and the United States might influence the succession process in North Korea, it is the sudden change in Pyongyang that could now have more of an impact in South Korea's National Assembly election in April and its presidential election in December. While events in North Korea are unlikely to have much of an impact on other leadership changes in the region, it will force U.S. presidential candidates to address a new dynamic when they (however briefly) talk about U.S. policy toward North Korea.

Since the stroke of DPRK leader Kim Jong-il in August 2008 and now his death in late 2011, almost all domestic and certainly all foreign interactions by Pyongyang have been focused on an accelerated and comprehensive effort to put in place a viable leadership successor. Inevitably, there are two schools of thought on the long-term prospects of success for a third generation hereditary succession in North Korea. The initial smoothness of the process has led many analysts to declare the transition a success, while others disagree pointing to the lack of depth of preparations, the inexperience of Kim Jong-un, and the youth of the new leader as significant points of comparison to the transition that took place in 1994 when Kim Jong-il succeeded his father as supreme leader. Also, somewhat counter intuitively, it is possible to view the rapidity with which Kim Jong-un has accumulated titles and support as a sign of weakness or at least a sign of a lack of confidence in the transition. By 1994 Kim Jong-il had already taken real control over the DPRK and yet assumed few titles and kept a low profile during a three-year "mourning period." As the dynamic with the current transition is different, with Kim attempting to give power to his son, Kim Jong-un does not appear to have the luxury of a long ambiguous transition.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL FACTORS

For the past three and a half years, a carefully orchestrated transition has been taking place. Kim Jong-il's sister Kim Kyong-hui and his brother-in-law Jang Song-thaek were given even more prominent places in government. The brother-in-law, Jang, was placed on the National Defense Commission—the highest governing body—in April 2009 and then in June 2010 was made one of its vice chairman. In September 2010 the selection of Kim's third and youngest son, Kim Jong-un, as the next leader was made official as he was made an instant four-star general and given the position of vice chairman of the Korean Workers Party's Central Military Commission. Kim Jong-il's sister was also made a four-star general. Favored generals were promoted and close confidants given key positions on the Politburo. In early November 2010 when co-author Jack Pritchard visited North

Korea for the eleventh time, he was told by senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that "all was well, that Kim Jong-il was healthy and in charge, and that they now have the pleasure of also serving the 'young general' – Kim Jong-un." The message was a deliberate effort to dispel outside speculation that Kim was on death's bed or that there was any opposition to Kim Jong-un as the next leader of North Korea. Thirteen months later, the situation drastically changed.

Why Kim Jong-un? There is some anecdotal evidence that Kim Jong-il had misgivings about a third generation Kim family successor to power. Unfortunately, he never acted to create an alternative opportunity and, conversely, was so concerned about a threat to his power that he actively eliminated potential contenders. Case in point was the demotion and banishment of his brother-in-law Jang Song-thaek for a period of time when it appeared that Jang was accumulating too much power in his own right. Whether or not Kim had a master plan in mind to cultivate a non-family related successor over time, the stroke he experienced in August 2008 had the effect of forcing his hand and limiting his choices. The stroke also had the effect of requiring an accelerated approach to introducing an acceptable successor. Thus, the choice of the third son, Kim Jong-un. While lacking credibility or experience of his own, Jong-un has the hereditary lineage and, fortunately for him, physical similarities to Kim Il-sung. In the immediate aftermath of Kim Jong-il's stroke, no one knew how much longer Kim would survive, thus the imperative of acting quickly to put in place a candidate that would have a certain level of backing from those loyal to Kim.

By the end of 2010, Kim Jong-il appeared to have recuperated significantly enough and while the question of his longevity could not be predicted accurately at that time, the process of grooming Kim Jong-un took on a more deliberate pace. The accelerated campaign to provide Kim Jong-un with instant credentials and the deliberate placing of Kim loyalists in key positions of power has worked so far. At the beginning of the process following Kim's stroke, conventional wisdom would not have bet that Kim Jong-un would be able to successfully succeed his father. There is no accepted practice of hereditary transfer of power in Socialist countries, particularly not to a third generation. The exception has been North Korea and success was by no means guaranteed. When Kim Jong-il came to power on July 8, 1994, he had been groomed as the officially designated heir for twenty years and by most accounts was already running the country day-to-day, yet he believed it both prudent and necessary to consolidate his power over a three-year period. As mentioned before, this relatively low-profile transition can also be viewed as evidence of confidence in a level of control and leadership which transcends titles. The prospect that a third generation Kim, without sufficient preparation, could take on the mantle of leadership without challenge defied common sense. While the efforts to assure a smooth transition have been extensive thus far, the fate of Kim Jong-un remains unsettled. In some respects, now that the funeral is over, loyalties have been declared, and titles conveyed, the real test is just beginning as Kim Jong-un will eventually have to make decisions and exercise the authority he has apparently been granted.

By examining the publicly announced outings by Kim Jong-il over a ten-month period beginning on September 1, 2010 (prior to the Party Congress), an interesting hierarchy has taken shape. In that period, Kim Jong-il made 103 appearances. Kim's brother-in-law, Jang Song-thaek, was listed seventy-seven times as accompanying Kim Jong-il. Of those, he was ranked ahead of Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho on only one occasion (September 9, 2010). At that time, Jang Song-thaek held the position of Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission. However, when Ri Yong-ho was promoted to vice marshal and NDC Vice Chairman on September 27, 2010, he began being listed ahead of Jang Song-thaek—indicating he was the more senior vice chairman. From September 29, 2010 until early February 2011, Ri Yong-ho was listed before Kim Jong-un. The *Chosun Ilbo* reported on February 16, 2011 that Kim Jong-un had been designated a vice chairman of the NDC—an appointment that needs ratification by the Supreme People's Assembly. While there has been no such notice by the Korea Central News Agency, Kim Jong-un consistently has been listed first (ahead of Ri Yong-ho and Premier Choe Yong-rim), an indication of Kim Jong-un's status regardless of his formal position within the NDC. Also, it may well have been a forewarning that Kim Jong-un's power would not emanate from the NDC, but ultimately through the Korean Workers Party. In the year since the *Chosun Ilbo* article, Kim Jong-un continued his preeminent position ahead of Ri Yong-ho at public outings without any additional public reference of a promotion or appointment to the NDC.

Analytically, the rejuvenation of the Worker's Party of Korea as a source of legitimacy and power was a necessary counterweight to the all-powerful military and the National Defense Commission.[1] At the Party Congress held in late September 2010, Kim Jong-il appointed his son as vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, and promoted his cousin, First Vice Minister Kang Sok-ju, to Deputy Premier and a member of the Politburo. Kim's sister, Kim Kyong-hui, along with Kim Jong-un was made a four-star general. Consequently, Kim Jong-un has formal ties and senior positions within both the WPK and the military and theoretically has corresponding protectors in each. This power base associated with the WPK and linkages to the military through Central Military Commission was reinforced when Jang Song-thaek was seen shortly after the death of Kim Jong-il in uniform for the first time with the rank of full general. Conceptually, Kim Jong-un has authority stemming from his bloodline to his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, and the Worker's Party of Korea even as he continues to build his credentials with the military. This is critical in the short-run. From a military hierarchical point of view, Kim Jong-un is a political appointee who has been imposed upon a seniority-conscious system that currently enjoys premier status within the country. While it is difficult to draw clear distinctions between the military and the party, there is considerable overlap in the leadership of both. One of the credible scenarios following the stroke of Kim Jong-il in August 2008, when an heir had not yet been announced, was that the military, perhaps using the structure of the NDC, would take control of the government following the demise of Kim Jong-il. That scenario will remain a plausible possibility until Kim Jong-un is fully accepted within the military as the legitimate leader of North Korea. And that probably will not fully be known until months if not years after he assumes the chairmanship of the

NDC. Here, however, it is useful to remember that the NDC itself was a vehicle largely constructed by Kim Jong-il and there is no guarantee that Kim Jong-un will use the same structure.

The provocative events of 2010 were seen by some as an effort to build the military legend of Kim Jong-un. Shortly after the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong-do attacks, rumors abounded within North Korea that Kim Jong-un had been given credit for planning and ordering the two incidents. Reports that Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un had visited the military district from whence the shelling of Yeonpyong-do took place in the days before the attack would seem to give some weight to these rumors. Still, it is highly unlikely that Kim Jong-un, who has no military experience, was involved in any meaningful way, but the fact that he may have been assigned credit is consistent with an internal concern that Kim Jong-un might not be readily accepted by the military as its leader. At any rate, the events of 2010 were extreme and are hopefully not likely to be repeated anytime soon. As might be understood, however, much of the concern surrounding the transition in Pyongyang has focused on the presumption that as a new and untested leader, Kim Jong-un may be inclined toward provocative actions to shore up domestic support. While certainly possible, the far more likely scenario is that North Korea will conduct tests related to its missile or nuclear weapons programs which, although they may be driven by the internal timing and demands of those programs, the outside world is likely to perceive as provocative. Another short-term concern will be how the new leadership in Pyongyang reacts to long-planned and rather pro-forma U.S.-ROK joint military exercises, which the North has always viewed as provocative, but which to date they have only responded to with rhetoric. The question will be whether Kim Jong-un will have the capacity to calibrate a response.

Just as Kim Jong-il was apparently uncomfortable and uncertain about publicly exercising his own authority immediately after the death of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un will hopefully be even more conscious of his own power base as he is given more and more titles in the process of assuming full leadership of the country. On December 31, KCNA reported that Kim Jong-un has assumed the "Supreme Commandership" of the Korean People's Army at the behest of leader Kim Jong-il on October 8, 2011, attempting to create the allusion that Jong-un had been promoted by a living Kim Jong-il.[2] With renewed emphasis on the WPK, Kim Jong-un will have a level of theoretical power but it will be important to watch how the military reacts when future crises confront the new supreme leader.

Kim Jong-il was very careful to cultivate a loyal base of power by catering to the military. His *songun* (military first) policy inculcated in society the legitimate place of the military as the protector of the nation. The revision of the constitution and the establishment of the National Defense Commission as the preeminent organizational authority ensured the continued dominance of the military as the sole center of power. In the New Year's Day Joint Editorial in January 2009, the first following Kim Jong-il's stroke, "*songun*" was mentioned twenty-six times—about twice as much as it was mentioned in 2010, 2011 and most recently in 2012. In practical terms, the military has been relatively pampered. It enjoys

significant privilege among its senior members. In reporting by KCNA on Kim Jong-un's assumption of Supreme Commander, it noted, "His assumption of the supreme commandership provides sure guarantee for glorifying the great exploits performed by Kim Jong-il for the army building and carrying forward the cause of the *songun* (military-first) revolution generation after generation." This is an important reality to understand as we contemplate what change in North Korean leadership means now that Kim Jong-il is dead. Even if everything goes according to Kim Jong-il's desires, a young Kim Jong-un will need the actual and behind the scenes support of the military if he is to survive the inevitable challenges that leadership brings with it. The prospect that either Kim Jong-un or the military would voluntarily entertain serious reforms following the death of Kim Jong-il is slight. The Joint New Year's Editorial had a single sentence that was meant to emphatically convey that no change would be forthcoming: "The dear respected Kim Jong-un is precisely the great Kim Jong-il."[3] The military elite thrive on their special status. Meaningful reform would threaten that existence. The near-term political health of Kim Jong-un will depend in large measure on how well Vice Marshall Ri Yong-ho and other leading military supporters of Kim Jong-un are able to deliver the long-term loyalty of the military. Before skeptics scoff at the prospects of a disloyal element within the military, it would be beneficial to remember the circumstances that led to the disbanding of the Army's Sixth Corps during the early years of Kim Jong-il's tenure. The prevailing analytical view just before the fall of Ferdinand Marcos was that there would not be a military coup because the Philippines did not have a history of military coups. Once the first one occurred, Philippine history was replete with them.

In April 2009, when the DPRK constitution was revised, the principle of military first was raised to the same level of importance as *juche*. The other significant change affecting the military was an addition to its mission statement. Article 59 now begins: "The mission of the armed forces of the DPRK is to carry out the military-first revolutionary line in order to protect the nerve center of the revolution…" In other words, the role of the military is to protect leader (then, Kim Jong-il) and sustain itself. Safeguarding the interests of the working people was relegated to a lesser importance. The 2009 Constitution also contains a new section regarding the Chairman of the National Defense Commission. The chairman of the NDC is constitutionally designated the "supreme leader (*ch'oego ryo'ngdoja*) of the DPRK." Ken Gause, an expert on DPRK leadership, in a blog for the Korea Economic Institute on January 3, 2012, raised an interesting issue to follow:

> The role of Supreme Commander (*Choson inmin'gun ch'oego*) raises an important question. Will Kim Chong-un be made chairman of the National Defense Commission, a post that is responsible for commanding the armed forces (i.e., the Supreme Commander)? Although the North Korean media called for Kim Chong-un to assume the role of Supreme Commander, it has been mute on the post of NDC chairman. The regime may choose to leave the NDC post vacant. Much as Kim Il-sung became the eternal president,

> Kim Chong-il might become the eternal head of the NDC, an organization that embodied his leadership era. This scenario might have been tipped by the fact that at least one, if not more, of the funeral events have been handled by Chon Hui-chong, the protocol director for the NDC. This suggests the possibility that the NDC apparatus is already acting in the service of the Party's CMC.[4]

Kim Jong-il's 2008 stroke had profound effects. The lack of a designated heir led to an accelerated effort to protect the legacy and future of the Kim family. This was done by placing key family members and loyalists in critical positions. Jang Song-thaek and his wife, Kim Jong-il's sister, have been promoted and placed in top echelons of government. Jang and his wife were almost always at Kim Jong-il's side when he forayed out in public. The institution of the military and the military-first policy has been codified as the single most important element in society. Select generals, loyal to Kim, are in controlling positions within the WPK and the Politburo. Up until now the National Defense Commission and its chairman were the center of power in North Korea, but with the death of its chairman and no particular effort to publicly reaffirm its practical power, its status is questionable. In the absence of a chairman, the role of the four vice chairmen should become more important. Two of the vice chairmen are in their eighties, another is seventy-six. The fourth is Jang Song-thaek who turns sixty-six in 2012. A case can be made that actual power will emanate from the military component of the WPK—the Central Military Commission. This scenario has Jang Song-thaek, NDC vice chairman, acquiescing to the shift in power and Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho supporting it from his position as CMC vice chairman.

THE CHINA FACTOR

In late May 2011, Kim Jong-il made an extensive visit to China, his third in the span of one year. Kim's visit took him to Mudanjiang, Changchun, Yangzhou, Nanjing and Beijing. It appears that Kim had two reasons for making the trip, both related to succession. By firmly establishing his interest in China's remarkable economic achievement, he signaled to his posterity a usable rationale for pursuing economic development and reform after his death much in the same way Kim Jong-il was able to say that denuclearization was his father's dying wish. It was difficult for the military to challenge the wishes of the founding father and it also served as a ready response to outsiders who challenge Pyongyang's sincerity with regard to denuclearization. Secondly, it reinforces with China's leadership that there is still hope that North Korea will follow China's economic development model. This latter is particularly important in that it provides Pyongyang with continued Chinese support in the short-term and works in favor of Beijing's longer-term support of Kim Jong-un—especially if Beijing believes Kim Jong-un is likely to carry out his father's goals of economic revitalization. At the same time, the Chinese leadership has made it abundantly clear, that as much as they might wish for North Korea to follow the Chinese path of economic reform and opening, their first priority is the stability of North Korea.

REGIME SURVIVAL AT RISK

North Korea has survived on a strict concept of one-man authoritarian rule. Kim Il-sung eliminated rivals and tolerated no dissent. Kim painstakingly ensured his son learned the art of iron-fisted leadership over a twenty-year period. Even then, when Kim Il-sung died in July 1994, there were concerns that Kim Jong-il might not survive. But at age fifty-two and twenty years of practical experience under his belt, he took three years to fully consolidate his power base and then autocratically ruled for the next eleven years until his stroke in August 2008. Facing his own mortality, Kim Jong-il began a hasty and accelerated plan for succession. He settled on his then twenty-five-year-old son as his successor. Finding the prospect of success low, Kim expanded the National Defense Commission (the ruling body) and named his brother-in-law first as a member and then later as a vice chairman. Kim appointed his sister and son a four-star general and began the process of revitalizing the Korean Workers Party as a counterweight to the military. Analysts predicted that the process would succeed only if Kim Jong-il lived long enough to cement the paper thin credentials he had bestowed upon his son, Kim Jong-un. For much of the three years since Kim Jong-il's stroke, the basic equation has remained unchanged; the longer Kim Jong-il lived, the greater the prospects for a smooth and successful transition; the more abrupt and sudden his demise, the less likely that a succession would hold. In the end, Kim Jong-il was unable to escape the frighteningly accurate math of actuarial tables, which predicted that a man of his age, health and habits was highly unlikely to live another five years after a stroke. We are left then with a scenario in which Kim Jong-il lived long enough to ensure that the succession would take place. What remains to be seen is whether he lived long enough to ensure that it would last.

The consequences for Kim Jong-un because of his father's abrupt death may be dire. He has virtually no practical experience, no individual power base and a system newly designed to weakly function after Kim Jong-il as check and balance between the military, the party and a regent (Jang Song-thaek). The problem is that Kim Jong-il elevated the military through his Military First Policy to the point where it is THE power in North Korea, and efforts to share power can only come through the diminution of the military—something it will not accept in the mid- to long-term. With Kim Jong-un having been given apparent authority so quickly, an early test will be what happens when he begins to exercise that authority, particularly if it is a direction opposed by members of the military.

As we are seeing it play out, there will be a natural and short-lived period of public unity in the aftermath of Kim's death. However, the consolidation of power and the maneuvering that is going on behind the scenes will come to the surface—probably shortly after the April 15 celebrations of Kim Il-sung's 100th birthday. At some point the military will challenge the right of Kim Jong-un to rule, wondering what added value he brings. Objectively, Kim Jong-un is in power because of his royal bloodline. If the military finds Kim Jong-un no longer useful as the public face of continuity of the Kim dynasty, it is possible that he too will vanish from public view.

The most likely scenario, then, over the near-term is for a weak, unprepared, and unacceptable Kim Jong-un to continue the formal transition to select positions of power. Because of his absolute dependence upon the military, he will not have the ability to attempt any reforms that the military finds risky or threatening to their supreme position within society. That means he will not be able to seriously engage the West in denuclearization negotiations, which will result in a continuation of regional and international economic and diplomatic isolation. Kim Jong-un's practical choice will be to govern in a status quo manner. He will, in effect, command a sinking ship. As the situation inevitably deteriorates, the military will be tempted to take things in their own hands, relegating Kim Jong-un to a powerless figurehead.

IMPLICATIONS

The leadership change that is taking place in the DPRK is likely to be turbulent at some point and may be the precursor of the end of the Kim regime that has ruled the DPRK for over sixty years. This has serious implications for China, South Korea and the United States. The year 2012 would have been critical even without the death of North Korean Leader Kim Jong-il as leadership change in a number of countries is scheduled to take place. Relationships were bound to be modified; new leaders tested and new policies enacted; initial year posturing by countries for which campaign promises are the metric for early evaluation. The sudden imposition of Kim Jong-un as the leader of an immature nuclear state with a history of military provocations and critical economic shortcomings is bound to have a compounding effect on the nature of regional leadership changes.

Implications for the United States: For the United States, Kim Jong-il's death came just as a small opening was appearing after several years of diplomatic stagnation. For a number of years Donald Zagoria of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) has hosted a senior level Track 1.5 roundtable discussion involving either North Korean Vice Minister Kim Gye-gwan or Ambassador Li Gun and a number of prominent former American officials. The North Koreans have found these sessions to be useful because of the seniority of American participants and seek to attend when invited. The Department of State was able to parlay a request for visas to attend an early August 2011 session into actual leverage that required the North Koreans to first engage with their South Korean counterparts in Bali on the margins of the ASEAN Conference in July. That meeting led the State Department to issue visas for Kim Gye-gwan to attend the NCAFP meeting and the first face-to-face meeting between North Korean and U.S. government officials in the United States during the Obama administration.

In turn, a second North-South meeting was held in Beijing in late September followed by the second North Korea–U.S. meeting held in Geneva in mid-October. To be sure these meetings were likely more tactical for both Pyongyang and Washington. North Korea was under serious pressure from both Russia and China to return to the Six-Party Talks and, for its part, Washington needed to demonstrate clearly to China and Russia that the United States was not the

obstacle in the process and that it was willing to engage with North Korea as long as Pyongyang demonstrated some "seriousness of purpose." Still, this series of exchanges had the promise of moving the process back towards a restart of the Six-Party Talks, which had been suspended since late 2008. U.S. Special Envoy for Human Rights Bob King met with North Korean Director General for American Affairs Li Gun in Beijing on the two days prior to Kim Jong-il's death. Press speculated that a deal had been reached that would have provided North Korea with 20,000 tons of "nutritional assistance" each month for a year in exchange for Pyongyang's suspension of its uranium enrichment program and reentry of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. Additionally, U.S. Representative for North Korea Policy Glyn Davies was reportedly preparing to meet with First Vice Minister Kim Gye-gwan the following week.[5]

Kim's death on December 17 put this possible breakthrough on hold. The North Korean New Year's Day Joint Editorial used language that was meant to signal to the outside world that its new leader should be seen as natural continuity from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un. That suggests that, at some appropriate point, just as it happened after the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994, North Korea will emerge from its period of mourning and reengage the United States. What we do not know is how the powers behind Kim Jong-un will react. Does continuity really mean continuity or will new challenges mean the opportunity for fissures to emerge?

We got a glimpse of what the answers may be when Pyongyang contacted the United States with a request to continue the discussions cut short by Kim Jong-il's death. That reengagement led to what is being called the "Leap Day" agreement in which North Korea "upon request by the U.S. and with a view to maintaining positive atmosphere for the DPRK-U.S. high-level talks, agreed to a moratorium on nuclear tests, long-range missile launches, and uranium enrichment activity at Nyongbyon and allow the IAEA to monitor the moratorium on uranium enrichment while productive dialogues continue."[6] Unfortunately, Pyongyang publicly announced its intention to launch a satellite during the celebrations for Kim Il-sung's 100th birthday on April 15. Initially, some analysts concluded that the announcement, which would violate UN Security Council resolutions and the Leap Day agreement, was an early indication of a power struggle behind the scenes in Pyongyang. However, information is coming to light that indicates that North Korean negotiators reminded the United States of its interpretation of the difference between an intercontinental ballistic missile (weapon) and a space launch vehicle, which it has the sovereign right to launch. If the latter proves true, it will mean that there is no visible infighting over this issue at this time.

Given that 2012 is an election year in the United States, a launch of a satellite will be met by an angry reaction by the United States and its allies. During the course of a joint press conference with President Lee Myung-bak at the Blue House in Seoul in November 2010, President Obama was asked about the prospects for the Six-Party Talks. He responded that "…there will be an appropriate time and place to reenter into six-party talks. But we have to see a seriousness of purpose by the North Koreans in order to spend the extraordinary time and energy

that's involved in these talks."[7] During an election year the "extraordinary time and energy" to which President Obama referred will also include attempting to overcome strong congressional criticism of North Korea and the possibility that the issue could become politicized in the course of the campaign. There may also be new hurdles to overcome such as the January 5th Statement by the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea carried in KCNA: "As recognized by the world, the DPRK is a full-fledged nuclear weapons state and its nuclear deterrent is the revolutionary heritage which can never be bartered for anything." While this was issued as a response to President Lee Myung-bak's New Year's address, running such statements in KCNA does not seem to indicate a "seriousness of purpose" or a short-term return to the Six-Party Talks.

Implications for South Korea: For South Korea, however awkwardly their initial interaction with the new regime started, the death of Kim Jong-il means both the potential for political intrigue in their April 2012 National Assembly elections and the December 2012 presidential election and also, hopefully, the relief from North Korean military provocations, at least in the short run. A satellite launch will only reaffirm the worst suspicions about North Korea's intentions.

When compared with the reaction of the ROK President Kim Young-sam to the death of Kim Il-sung, the Lee Myung-bak administration's response to Kim Jong-il's death was the picture of reserve and moderation, but the constant stream of invective and vitriolic directed at President Lee and his "gang" in the last few weeks gives little hope for meaningful progress in inter-Korean relations during the remaining months of the administration. What remains to be seen, however, is what effect the North Korean stance will have on public opinion in South Korea and thus on the upcoming South Korean elections.

Already Grand National Party leader and possible presidential candidate Park Geun-hye has sought to distinguish herself from President Lee with a more nuanced approach to North Korea and that is to say nothing of the more progressive side of the spectrum, which has bemoaned the deterioration in inter-Korean relations over the past four years. Still, the lessons of 2010 and the strong public reactions to the sinking of the Cheonan, and particularly to the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do will not fade quickly. As long as there are no further clashes, it is likely that South Korea's approach toward the North will continue to moderate and that a change in policy toward North Korea will be part of the political debate during the election. However, should there be another incident, it will almost certainly further harden South Korean public opinion, that is if a strong South Korean response and further escalation can be avoided.

Implications for China: While it is difficult to make the case that the transition in North Korea, or any external factor for that matter, will make a difference in the political transition in China in 2012, China has already arguably been the country most affected by the succession process in North Korea. For the better part of a decade, cooperation on North Korea was a primary public justification in Washington for the importance of U.S.-China relations. However, beginning with Kim Jong-il's stroke and growing Chinese concerns about the potential for

instability in North Korea, China has reverted to a much more traditional stance in support of the Kim regime in Pyongyang and in so doing undermined and strained its relations with both Seoul and Washington.

Of course China has never abandoned its erstwhile ally. Yet during much of the 2000s China played an important role in the Six-Party Talks in an effort to curb North Korea's nuclear program. The Chinese leadership arguably maintained a "three no's" policy toward North Korea—no nukes, no collapse, and no war—and they tried to maintain a balance between the three priorities. As Kim Jong-il's health deteriorated, however, China began to place ever greater priority on avoiding instability in North Korea at all costs…even if it meant supporting a third generation hereditary succession which was anathema to communist ideology and China's own policy. This decision to be more proactive in backing Kim Jong-il appeared to move into full force in the early fall of 2009 when China backed away from implementing sanctions it had agreed to after North Korea's second nuclear test a few months before. Even after the sinking of the Cheonan, China opted to double down on its bet on Kim Jong-il and resist attempts to censure or punish North Korea for this act…something that some in the U.S. considered "enabling behavior" which might have contributed to the North's shelling of Yeonpyeong-do in November of 2010.

While China again blocked any meaningful international response to the Yeonpyeong-do shelling, when President Obama and President Hu Jintao met in Washington in January of 2011 it did appear that China may have been willing to recalibrate its support for North Korea. While it may seem arcane, there was some cause for optimism in how the issue was framed in the joint statement issued at the conclusion of their January summit. While there was but a single paragraph's reference to Korea in that statement, it contained both a clear reference to the uranium enrichment facility and the broader strategic context:

> The United States and China agreed on the critical importance of maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula as underscored by the Joint Statement of September 19, 2005 and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. Both sides expressed concern over heightened tensions on the Peninsula triggered by recent developments. The two sides noted their continuing efforts to cooperate closely on matters concerning the Peninsula. The United States and China emphasized the importance of an improvement in North-South relations and agreed that sincere and constructive inter-Korean dialogue is an essential step. Agreeing on the crucial importance of denuclearization of the Peninsula in order to preserve peace and stability in Northeast Asia, the United States and China reiterated the need for concrete and effective steps to achieve the goal of denuclearization and for full implementation of the other commitments made in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks. In this context, the United States and China expressed concern regarding the DPRK's claimed uranium

> enrichment program. Both sides oppose all activities inconsistent with the 2005 Joint Statement and relevant international obligations and commitments. The two sides called for the necessary steps that would allow for early resumption of the Six-Party Talks process to address this and other relevant issues.

Of note, in this short statement, the September 19, 2005, joint statement of the Six-Party Talks was mentioned three times. Such a reference to an obscure unimplemented agreement of talks that increasingly appeared defunct may seem a bit odd. However, one of the fundamental challenges of dealing with North Korea has been its frequent and continued assertion that it is a nuclear power and must be dealt with as such. When North Korea makes vague references to its support of denuclearization, its definition of denuclearization should be clarified and challenged. The apparent North Korean interpretation is that, as a nuclear power and an equal with the United States and the other nuclear powers in the world, it is willing to discuss the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, including the removal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the end of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and overall global disarmament of other nuclear powers' positions. This interpretation understandably does not accord with that of the United States, China, any other member of the Six-Party Talks, or ostensibly any other signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) from which North Korea is the only country in history to withdraw. As such, a clear reference to the September 19, 2005, joint statement in which North Korea committed to "abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards" helps set a clear definition of what the United States and China now jointly mean when they referred to "denuclearization" including the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Related to this is the question of the parameters of the Six-Party Talks. With the September 19 joint statement, the Six-Party Talks are now more than format, but also have function and content. Given that in the joint statement "the Six Parties unanimously reaffirmed that the goal of the Six-Party Talks is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner," by focusing upon this joint statement the United States and China once again jointly defined the parameters of—and indirectly a core requirement for—the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Also of note, the January 19, 2011, Obama-Hu joint statement placed U.S. and Chinese "concern regarding the DPRK's claimed uranium enrichment program" clearly in the context of the September 19, 2005 joint statement.

Despite this agreement, Chinese support for the Kim regime intensified over the course of 2011. Some would argue that such support stems from the fact that China's relationship with North Korea is handled on a party-to-party basis rather than by the Foreign Ministry in Beijing. Another possible interpretation is that the dramatic changes in the Middle East manifest in the Arab Spring unnerved the Chinese leadership and made them even less inclined to consider the possibility of instability in their long-standing ally in North Korea. Whatever the cause,

China has reassumed its long-standing role as North Korea's primary patron and protector and if the events of the last month are any indication, that is not an approach that is likely to change any time soon.

CONCLUSIONS/LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS

Despite the short-term uncertainties and the increased risk of instability associated with the passing of Kim Jong-il, in the long run his demise must be seen as a positive development for the Korean peninsula as a whole. Whatever expectations may have existed when he assumed power from his father in 1994, in the last few years it became increasingly apparent that as long as Kim Jong-il was alive it was almost impossible to imagine North Korea pursuing fundamental economic opening and reform, abandoning its nuclear ambitions, or reconciling with South Korea. There is of course no guarantee that any of the above will be possible under Kim Jong-un either. In some respects, the passing of Kim Jong-il is the classic "necessary" but not "sufficient" condition. While real change may yet be unlikely as long as the Kim family and the current regime are in control in North Korea, with the ongoing transition in Pyongyang we are at least one step closer to change of one form or another.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: GILBERT ROZMAN, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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KEI KOREA ECONOMIC INSTITUTE 한미경제연구소

1800 K Street, NW
Suite 1010
Washington, DC 20006

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