

The Post Kim Jong-il Era and Inter-Korea Relations: A Time for Cautious Hope

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The North Korea observers reacted to the news of Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2010. Talks of various scenarios for the post Kim Jong-il era have been in wide circulation since Kim II's stroke in 2008 however, the North Korean's death still rattled the globe for its timing and magnitude. Kim Jong-il joined the league of dictators who perished in 2011 following the brutal demise of Osama Bin Laden in May and Muammar Gaddafi October. The end of Kim's despotic power also precedes imminent leadership changes in the core regional governments of the U.S., South Korea, China, and Russia. The power transition in Pyongyang and possible instability has emerged as a new variable for regional security.

North Korea watchers provided a wide range of analysis for the implications of Kim II's death. The initial reactions were mostly on Kim Jong-il's bygone reign, ritualistic symbolisms of condolence, and intelligence on the circumstances of Kim Jong-il's death. The debates later progressed into three camps: pessimists projecting further economic deterioration and hostile intent of legitimization prerogatives, optimists predicting more openness given Kim Jong-un's cosmopolitan background, and traditionalists arguing for the status quo within the context of major regional stakeholder policy priorities. The prognoses varied per diagnoses: the need for heightened alert amid growing deprivation and provocations, a more active engagement to induce positive changes, and the call for wait-and-see stance. Kim Jong-il's passing reminded us of the usual praxis of North Korean studies in that 'we see what we want to see'. I summarize the flurry of reactions as 'continuity with possibilities of change' and argue that South Korea should take the initiative to improve inter-Korea relations.

Positive signs on the part of South Korea began to emerge even before the death of Kim Jong-il. The Lee Myung-bak administration has changed its heart to engage with North Korea since early 2011. Cheong Wa Dae began shifting gears in its Northern politics and the change of leadership within the Ministry of Unification was one of the most convincing indicators of this shift. Unification Minister Ryu Woo-ik has reiterated his willingness to re-engage with the Pyongyang regime. The ROK government has pledged to restart the provisions for humanitarian aid and improved the working conditions at the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) since Mr. Ryu's arrival. The road to the KIC has expanded and more shuttles are transporting North Korean workers.

With the possibility of an inter-Korea summit between President Lee and Kim Jong-il gone, Minister Ryu has made it clear that the possibility of holding top-level talks remains

as long as Kim Jong-un is proven a compatible partner with the DPRK's official recognition by the Party and Military leaders of his status. We can speculate on the reasons why President Lee wants to talk with Kim III at this particular moment. The presidential office does not want to miss an opportunity, as the Kim Young-sam administration did 18 years ago.

The YS administration lost its golden opportunity to hold the very first inter-Korean summit when Kim Il-sung passed away of sudden heart failure in 1994. The succeeding Kim Dae-jung administration left its mark on history for holding the first summit with Kim II in June 2000. Instead of dismissing Kim Jong-un (the 29-year-old hereditary leader with few proven credentials) as a legitimate counterpart, the Lee administration is willing to work directly with the new leadership in Pyongyang. That stance is consistent with Lee government's general policy characterization of pragmatism.

There is pressure to hurry as the Lee administration is nearing the end of its five-year presidential term. The administration is exhibiting increasing signs of a "lame-duck" syndrome and wants to add one more accomplishment.

This shift was exactly what happened during the George W. Bush administration. During his first term, the brash American president was not shy in expressing his moral contempt toward the now deceased North Korean leader and his regime by "deploring" him as a "pygmy" and a member of the "Axis of Evil." While Bush proved himself a judgmental name-caller, he toned down his rhetoric during his second term. He realized that uncouth acts of name-calling were not helpful in demonstrating diplomatic skills.

The Lee administration calls its Northern policy a "grand bargain." This means that Seoul's negotiation package includes all the relevant agenda items that range from denuclearization, halting of missile development, improvement of human rights and the end of the Northern Limit Line provocations. The idea of comprehensive bargaining has failed to induce the desired change on the

Pyongyang leadership, while the inter-Korean impasse has become more challenging. The North Korean sinking of the Cheonan and the Yeonpyeong shelling of 2010 were two very tragic reminders of consistent belligerence and provocations by the North.

Despite the moral abhorrence and the logistical hurdles, the Seoul government should readjust its stance toward the Pyongyang regime. That is because none of the neighboring countries in the region wants to see the two Koreas unified. East Asia as a region embeds many diversities. However, the regional governments' strategic calculations vis-a-vis Korean unification are similar and simple in that none of them wants the two Koreas unified.

Chinese regional hegemony insists on maintaining status quo and this includes the continuity of the Pyongyang leadership succession. It does not welcome the disruptive changes and chaos which could hamper its "peaceful rise." Japan, a self-claimed rival of South Korea, has very little to gain from a stronger and more vivacious Korean Peninsula. With its economy declining and dwindling governing capacity, the last thing Japan would want to see in regional dynamics is a unified Korea, especially in the aftermath of the March 11 earthquakes and tsunami.

Each regional government's different preoccupation with North Korea was clearly manifested soon after Kim Jong-il's death. The U.S. expressed its condolences to the "people" of North Korea, whereas China sent an impressive number and level of Party leaders to the DPRK Embassy in Beijing to pay tribute to Kim Il. The Chinese government soon declared its plan to provide food and oil to help boost the North Korean economy. Japan's primary concerns were on the possibility of military provocations and abduction issues however, South Korea experienced a sharp internal division over funeral attendance controversies.

The U.S. (S. Korea's staunch ally) would have the least of reservations about the unification prospects among the Big Three, and yet it will have to stay attuned to the dissenting voices from Beijing and Tokyo. The current hurdles for unification are many and real however, it does not mean that the Seoul should sit back and watch time pass.

Seoul has to take the initiative in re-opening dialogue with the North's regime in consideration of the medium power status of both Koreas in the league of big powers. This reflects two cold realities: South Korea is still a small regional player and if it does nothing about the current stalemate, no other players will.

The achievements of South Korea over the past decades are more than impressive. The beneficiary of international aid has now become a donor and a model to emulate for developing countries. However, China and Japan are the second and third largest powers in the international community. There should be a balancing perception between chronological and cross-sectional developments to

play smart within the region.

Korean affairs will have to be resolved by the two Koreas where Seoul has to take the initiative in dictating the terms with a subsequent moral, strategic, and economic burden on the South. I argue that economic cooperation is one realm that deserves a particular attention in Seoul's strategizing. One of the detrimental legacies of Kim Jong-il was the failing economy, and Seoul's efforts to help lift the bottle-necked socialist economy can pave a conciliatory road for the fledging Kim Jong-un regime.

South Korea should take this mission in stride because efforts to resolve the past 60 years of division are the realm of history. This cliché seems to have almost evaded the peninsula however, the diagnoses of the current state of affairs in the post Kim Jong-il era 'continuity with possibilities of change' demands a realistic and yet cautious strategizing on the part of the Lee Myung-bak administration.



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