

The Dawn of the Kim Jong Eun Regime and the Choice for North Korea

Choi Jin Wook

Director, Division of Planning and Coordination

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With the completion of Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday celebration on April 15th, the frenetic political schedule that North Korea has followed since Kim Jong Il's death has settled down a notch. During this period the regime has followed procedures for Kim Jong Eun's formal succession according to a prepared manual. Beginning with his role as chief mourner at Kim Jong Il's funeral, Kim Jong Eun's image as the supreme leader has been built up through various on-site guidance visits, the establishment of the "Kwangmyeongseong Festival" on Kim Jong Il's birthday (Feb. 16), the official codification of the 3rd generation succession via a revision of the Party Charter, and the launch of the long-range missile "Eunha-3" to celebrate the Kim Jong Eun regime's formal inauguration. The reason why so much attention has been focused on Kim Jong Eun's every movement and North Korea's political schedule is to discern the stability of the regime and the direction of its future policies.

Kim Jong Eun has seized the topmost leadership positions in the Party, government, and military, including first secretary of the Korean Workers Party, first chairman of the NDC, chairman of the KWP Central Military Commission, standing member of the Politburo, and supreme commander of the KPA. Also, as reported by the

North Korean media, he has fully displayed his status through on-site guidance trips of a frequency unmatched by his predecessor Kim Jong Il. Considering North Korea's tightly structured control system and support from China, there is not much reason to seriously doubt the stability of the new regime.

Yet the regime has nevertheless been unable to fully dispel the uncertainty about the new system. The reason for uncertainty has to do with the proportion of power occupied by the supreme leader. Probably few would disagree that Kim Jong Eun has been unable to attain the level of absolute power his father enjoyed. The abbreviated succession process and the emphasis on "the parting injunctions of Kim Jong Il" as the reason for his appointment as first secretary at the Party Delegates' Conference seem to attest to the weakness of his power structure. Kim Jong Il's appointment as "eternal party secretary" and "eternal NDC chairman" suggests that Kim Jong Il's help will continue to be essential to the stability of the Kim Jong Eun regime.

Kim Jong Eun's weak grip on power causes uncertainty in two aspects. The first involves loyalty competitions among the elites. With his weak power base, Kim Jong Eun will have to rely on his group of supporters while gradually expanding his own power over time. In the process many of the elites may change positions or be purged; this phenomenon has already been observed. State Security Agency 1st Deputy Director Woo Dong Cheuk, who was among the seven who escorted the hearse at Kim Jong Il's funeral, recently lost his position. Peoples' Armed Forces Minister Kim Young Chun also appears to have taken a step back. In their place, General Political Bureau Director Choe Ryong Hae (who is also a Central Military Commission vice chairman and a Politburo Standing Committee member), People's Safety Agency Director Ri Myeong Su, and new SSA Director Kim Won Hong have risen to the core leadership. North Korea's elites cannot help but feel insecure, having witnessed the suspicious deaths or purges of many of their fellow elites, including Ri Jeh Gang, Pak Nam Gi, and Ryu Kyeong, in the time since Kim Jong Eun was unofficially approved as successor. For the sake of their own survival they will compete with each other to demonstrate their loyalty, and excessive displays of loyalty by hard-liners in the regime will be a source of instability on the Korean peninsula.

A second problem is that a leader with a weak grip on power will have difficulty controlling policy-making. In the North Korean system, which professes to a "military-first" philosophy, the systematized ruling structure known as the "Party-state system" has been supplanted by a system of personal and direct rule

by the absolute ruler. The core organs of the Party, government, and military – such as the Organization and Guidance Department, the Department of Administration, the State Security Agency, the People’s Security Agency, the Foreign Ministry, the General Political Bureau, the General Chiefs of Staff, and the People’s Armed Forces Ministry – all act according to direct commands from the control tower, and thus the control tower’s role is of absolute importance. However, since Kim Jong Eun has not yet seized absolute power, he cannot smoothly control the various agencies focused around the control tower. The absence of a strong central control tower could become the greatest source of uncertainty as the Kim Jong Eun regime ventures into the unknown without a manual. For example, the announcement of the “Eunha-3” launch plans after the Leap Day Agreement with the US had been concluded, the decision to invite foreign reporters to view the launch followed by the decision not to open the actual launch site to the press, and the admission of the launch’s failure – such decisions do not seem to have been the result of carefully calculated planning.

Having tasted failure with the Eunha-3 launch and acknowledged their failure to achieve the status of a “strong and prosperous great nation,” what will the Kim Jong Eun regime choose as their next step? The regime spent lavishly on projects in the name of building a “strong and prosperous great nation,” such as the Pyongyang beautification project and the long-range missile launch; the side-effects of these excessive expenditures, which had been concealed during the mourning period, will soon begin to come to light.

For the moment the regime will make internal solidarity its top priority. In his speech on April 15th Kim Jong Eun appeared to be trying to manipulate public sentiment, emphasizing improvements in the people’s standard of living. Through the effort to build up his image after his father’s death, Kim Jong Eun has been given the image of a gentle leader like Kim Il Sung, the successor to the legacy of Kim Jong Il, the successor to the military-first political system, and a military leader. But there is no sign that he has presented a vision for the country’s future or taken the image of a reformer.

In light of Kim Jong Eun’s experience living abroad and his young age there was some hope that he might lead a reform-minded regime, but it is hard to find a basis for such an argument looking at his behavior and the character his regime has shown thus far. Even those who interpret the regime’s acknowledgement of the Eunha-3 rocket’s failure as a sign of new leadership under Kim Jong Eun are only demonstrating groundless wishful thinking.

With the exception of Kim Jong Eun and certain members of the privileged class, most North Koreans in their 20s and 30s have far less overseas experience than their parents' or grandparents' generations had. After liberation many in North Korea's leadership had the experience of living in China or the Soviet Union, and up until the collapse of the socialist bloc in the late 1980s many had studied abroad in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. After that, however, the economic hardships and the collapse of the East European bloc meant a dramatic reduction in opportunities to experience life and study abroad.

Indirect methods of tightening internal solidarity include fomenting external tensions or gaining foreign aid. It appears that after Kim Jong Il's death the regime's plan was to increase tensions with South Korea and apply pressure on the US in order to extract concessions and gain economic aid and tacit acceptance of the Kim Jong Eun regime. But with the launch of the long-range missile it appears unlikely that US-DPRK relations will be able to break out of their stalemate this year. As it seeks to recover from the Eunha-3 failure, North Korea is likely to carry out additional provocations such as a 3rd nuclear test in order to increase its bargaining power in anticipation of renewed US negotiations next year.

North Korea's tension-stoking behavior is likely to continue through the first half of next year. By stoking inter-Korean tensions the North will try to create internal conflict within South Korea over security issues and influence the South Korean presidential election to ensure that the next administration takes a friendlier stance toward North Korea. In their dealings with the US, the issues raised will include not only food aid and sanctions but also fundamental problems like the signing of a peace treaty.

The heightening of tensions is a greater concern under the Kim Jong Eun government than it was under his father's regime, because of the fear that without a strong control tower the regime might fail to keep tensions under control. For example, with the intensifying loyalty competition among the elites, Kim Jong Eun may not be able to restrain them from overdoing the North's conventional brinkmanship tactics, and this might lead to a serious provocation. We must have thorough plans in place to deal with the North's uncertain situation.