

Putting Together the North Korea Puzzle

by Dr. Kongdan Oh and Prof. Dr. Ralph C. Hassig

North Korea has always been known as a troublesome state, but lately its antics have alienated even its strongest supporters. At the same time, there is good reason to believe that the dictator Kim Jong-il is seriously ill and hurriedly trying to arrange a succession to one of his sons. Could these external and internal events be related, and will the old pattern of North Korean provocations answered by foreign tolerance and reward continue?

Something's always happening in Kim Jong-il's North Korea, although only occasionally do developments make it to the front page of foreign newspapers. When North Korea does get into the news, it is invariably for something bad, like a missile launch, a nuclear test, or human rights violations, and such events are usually interpreted as an example of the Kim Jong-il regime's perversity or evil intent. Yet despite decades of bad press, dictator Kim has shown himself to be a shrewd politician who has managed to stay in power even though his country is perennially bankrupt and permanently listed as one of the world's bad boys. Leaders of other countries come and go, but Kim remains. Surely he must be doing something right – at least for himself.

The most newsworthy stories out of North Korea concern the regime's military; for example, the production of weapons-grade plutonium and enriched uranium; the underground nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009 and missile launches, especially of medium-range missiles in 1998, 2006, and 2009. Recently, the Korean People's Army announced that it will no longer honor the Korean War Armistice, and the regime frequently warns that the Korean peninsula is on the brink of war, hinting that the next war will be fought with nuclear weapons. The South Korean public seems less concerned about North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles than with the intrusions of its navy across the inter-Korean border in the West Sea.

On the diplomatic front, North Korea's sporadic participation in the Six-Party Talks, dedicated to ending its nuclear weapons program, has been receiving news coverage since the talks were first convened in 2003 – despite the fact that many knowledgeable insiders suspect that the talks are more show than substance. North Korea's violently worded rejections of UN resolutions objecting to its nuclear tests, missile launches, and human rights record are always newsworthy, especially when the North claims that these resolutions, or the sanctions they call for, are declarations of war. In the United States, North Korea's secret trial of two American women for illegally crossing the border (which they may or may not have done) has become yet another reason for Americans to hate North Korea.

In 2000 the leaders of the two Koreas held their first summit meeting, leading many people on both sides of the border to expect that the country was on a path to reunification. From 1998 to 2008, two South Korean presidents focused their attention on pleasing the Kim regime, at all costs. Relations improved somewhat, but the North continued to hold antagonistic views of the South. When the South Koreans elected a president in 2008 who was no longer willing to give North Korea anything it asked for, the North Koreans severed almost all ties with the South Korean government and called for the impeachment of the South Korean "traitor" president.

In reply, the South Korean government quite understandably stopped sending food and fertilizer aid to the North, and halted operation of the Mt. Kumgang tourist reservation when the North Koreans refused to conduct a joint investigation of the killing of a South Korean tourist. Most recently, the Kaesong Industrial Complex has come under pressure from the North Koreans (who are also holding a South Korean worker incommunicado) and may have to be shut down as well. The Kim regime seems to be gambling that the South Korean people will become so angry about the breakdown in inter-Korean relations that they will turn against their president; instead, they have turned against North Korea, and it is rumored that the North Korean architect of inter-Korean relations has been executed for his mistaken policy.

To make matters worse, North Korea's economic and political relations with Japan could not be worse, and the North's relations with its major benefactor, China, became strained when the North walked out on the Six-Party Talks, which were hosted by the Chinese. The North's 2009 nuclear test, in clear violation of China's wishes, has led to China's joining the rest of the UN Security Council in imposing further economic sanctions on North Korea. In short, by its premeditated actions, the Kim regime has alienated almost the entire world community.

All these events may be related to what is going on inside North Korea. Although foreigners can only guess about what events are transpiring at the upper levels of North Korean officialdom, it is almost a certainty that Kim Jong-il suffered a serious stroke in August 2008, and judging by his loss of weight and haggard appearance, it is likely that he has suffered from follow-up strokes or other health problems since then, although none of this has been reported in the North Korean press. It is also known that serious food shortages persist among the general population, and industry still operates at no more than 25 percent of capacity. The North Korean press has promised the people that by the year 2012, which will be the 100th anniversary of the death of the founder, Kim Il-sung, and the 70th birthday of Kim Jong-il, North Korea will have become a Kangsong Taeguk, that is, an economically and militarily powerful state, and in futile pursuit of this goal, the country's first "speed battle" in several years commenced on May 10, 2009 and will run for 150 days until October 10, the Korean Workers' Party founding day. In the past, the North has gained little from these "work-harder-and-faster" speed battles, which are much resented by the people, but the battles do provide a way for the government to keep the people agitated and more under control than usual.

It is rumored that Kim is so ill that many decisions are being made by others (although Kim has reportedly made twice as many public appearances in the first six months of this year as during the same period last year – assuming it is really Kim and not one of his doubles). Rumors abound that Kim is now hurriedly preparing one of his sons, quite possibly his youngest, to succeed him.

These are all parts of the puzzle: the heightened military activity, the belligerent diplomacy, the ill health of the supreme leader, and succession politics. Is there a way to put them all together? For a start, it is clear that North Korea, like other countries, is working to preserve its national security. The missiles and nuclear weapons (along with North Korea's formidable conventional weapon arsenal and military manpower), are entirely consistent with a concern for national security. After all, the United States, to protect its own security, has far more weapons of mass destruction than North Korea will ever have, with no intention of giving them up. Since President George W. Bush labeled North Korea, in 2002, as a member of his "axis of evil," the North Koreans have even more reason to seek a strong military deterrent.

Even more important than protecting the security of the nation is keeping Kim Jong-il and his supporters in power. Kim is unwilling for North Korea to survive as a country unless he or one of his sons is running things. The first duty of every citizen has always been to protect the leader, not to defend the country. Perhaps as many as a million North Korean elites believe that if their government reforms or collapses, they will be out of a job and perhaps on their way to jail, so they are motivated to uphold the status quo at all costs. Opening North Korea's borders or reforming the economy so that millions of other North Koreans can live a better life is not in the best interests of the ruling class. This is why offers from the United States to accept North Korea into the international community if it gives up its nuclear weapons are interpreted as a threat by the Kim regime.

But why would North Korea stir up so much trouble in just the last year, conducting a second nuclear test when the world was already convinced it had nuclear weapons and launching another medium-range missile, both in defiance of UN resolutions? And why would it alienate the South Korean government, one of its strongest supporters?

As Kim's health has declined, foreigners have begun to speculate, just as they did after his father's death, that the country may collapse without a Kim at its helm. The United States and South Korea have been refurbishing their plans to intervene in case North Korea, already an economic basket case, descends into anarchy, and China, Russia, and Japan must be working on their own contingency plans as well. It would be quite natural for Kim and his military supporters to want to convince the world that North Korea is stronger than ever, and not easy prey for intervention or takeover. This is one plausible explanation for the recent military activity.

A second explanation involves succession politics. If Kim has only a few years to live, or at least to be healthy enough to direct the country's affairs, he needs a successor, and because North Korean propaganda has always claimed that the Kim family is the only truly revolutionary family, it seems inevitable that Kim appoints one of his three (illegitimate) sons to succeed him. The choice is not an easy one to make, because the eldest son (Kim Jong-nam) fell out of favor with his father years ago and has since been exiled to Macao. The second son, Kim Jong-chol, may be a candidate for succession, but rumors suggest that he is too "soft" to be a dictator. Currently, the successor looks to be Kim's third son, Kim Jong-un, only 26 years of age. Just as Kim needed years of work to ingratiate himself with senior officials and introduce himself to the public, so Kim's successor will need years of preparation for the throne, unless he is simply installed as a figurehead leader.

Although Kim Jong-il, as the successor to his soldier-father, had no military experience, over the years the North Korean press has credited him with many bold military exploits, including the 1968 capture of the American spy ship *Pueblo* and the 1976 ax murder of American

soldiers at Panmunjom. Now, Kim is called the "respected and beloved general." Given the importance of the military in today's North Korea, the next ruling Kim must also claim military prowess, although none of Kim's sons is known to have distinguished himself in the military in any way. A substitute might be for North Korea to engage in belligerent activities so that the successor, whoever he may be, can mount a warhorse already in full gallop.

Finally, one by-product of militarization is poorer relations with the international community, but this cannot be helped. The fact that North Korea has gone out of its way to anger South Korea can be explained not only as a political miscalculation but also as a very human response to frustration. Things have not been going well for Kim – the new South Korean president wants something in return for the billions in aid sent to the North, and the new American president is unwilling to make the same mistakes as his predecessor – so Kim may be lashing out at the world. This is a dictator's prerogative, and also his weakness.

When threatened, a porcupine sticks out its spines. This is the Kim regime's customary response to a hostile world, because weapons and threats are all the regime has to work with. As the country's foreign ministry said in an angry reply to the most recent UN sanction resolution, "The DPRK is a small country, but it is a political, ideological and military power." In the past, North Korea's stubbornness and military power have been sufficient to extract economic concessions and grudging political recognition from the rest of the world. Kim is surely hoping that, once the dust settles, he or his successor can yet again make a deal that will extend the Kim dynasty for another decade or two, but growing skepticism in Beijing, Seoul, and Washington may be a sign that this time around, the international community will stand together and stoutly resist North Korea's threats.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors. The analysis has already been published by Foreign Policy Research Institute (www.fpri.org) in Philadelphia.



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