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View Point

North Korea's Conundrum and its implications

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Aspersions have been cast about the stability of the North Korean regime after the death of Kim Jong-Il and coming to power of a relatively immature and inexperienced Kim-Jong-Un. How the regime succession in North Korea would turn out to be?, how the elites in the country would align themselves with the new regime?, and how the reclusive State would posture to the larger world in the ambit of its nuclear and missile capabilities, has concerned all the stakeholders in the region.

Being a communist and closed country the strength of the propaganda machine in North Korea cannot be undermined, which has already claimed the young leader as their 'Dear leader' and elevated it to the pedestal enjoyed by his father and grandfather. The fact that the death of Kim Jong-Il was not known to the outside world for almost two days, underscores the iron-fisted rule in the country and scuffle for leadership position. Though the elites jostling for higher positions and influences in the government cannot be ruled out, it would not be pragmatic to estimate the weakness of the ruling regime at the present juncture, as the North Korean elites are likely to present a united stand at least in the short-term to the outside world.

The considerable authority of Kim Jong-il over civilian and military institutions was largely personal. He developed a relatively complex network of civilian and military institutions to rule the country, the majority of which were led by relatives and associates loyal to him, like Korean Worker's Party organs like the

Politburo and Central Military Commission. Therefore, it is unlikely that Kim Jong-un will have as much sway and authority as his father or grandfather, given his youth and inexperience. As succession plans have only been in place since 2008, Kim Jong-il's death has occurred a bit early to secure Kim Jong-un's rule, who was made a four-star general and vice-chair of the Party's Central Military Commission in September 2010, and vice Chairman of the National Defence Commission in February 2011.

In this context the regent Chang Song Taek, and his wife Kim Kyong-hui, the sister of Kim Jong-Il, needs to be watched out. Chang Song Taek is a member of the Politburo, and vice-chairman of the National Defence Commission, who is reported to be close to China. Some reports even suggest that the Chinese would have preferred him to succeed rather than Kim Jong-un. He is said to have played a considerable role during Kim Jong-il's illness in managing the succession problem and North Korea's relations with the United States and China. He has gone through purges and 're-education' in the past to emerge as one of Kim Jong-il's closest confidants, and was even reported to have adopted one of Kim-Jong-il's illegitimate sons, Kim Jang-hyun. His wife Kim Kyong-hui, is also a four-star general, and a Politburo member, who served as light industry minister earlier. Chang Song Taek and her wife were appointed to help establish the young Mr Kim as heir and act as the new leader's mentors. Still, there could be risks in making Chang Song Taek as the regent, as he is likely to have his own power base within the government, and sufficient dislike to throw away the new regime. These factors, including his involvement in economic projects and directing internal security matters, gives rise to speculation that Chang Song-Taek may attempt to seize power himself.

However, this may not be as easy as it seems. Ri Yong-ho, the chief of the military joint chiefs of staff is supposed to provide a counterweight to Chang Song-Taek. He is the axis of three power bases- the military, the party's Central Military Commission, and the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau. Besides the two, Kim Yong-nam, head of parliament; Kim Jong-un's older half-brother, Kim Jong-nam; and Choe Yong-rim, the premier's hold on the power cannot be underestimated.

In this backdrop, direct over-throw of the young monarch seems a bit difficult. As beneficiaries of the current system, any open competition among the various

power-groups may harm their own interests. They are likely to keep the external power structure intact. Nevertheless their effort to control over the young leader, in a way that he becomes a pawn in their power games, and is reduced to a puppet, who may reign, but not rule, seems more plausible.

Having no military experience, the young Kim may find it necessary to demonstrate that he has the capabilities to lead the country. In this context his usage of missile or, nuclear device to send a message to the various powerful groups in the country and to the larger world, may complicate the entire security scenario in the East Asian region. The surprise sinking of the South Korean naval vessel, the Cheonan, in March 2010, is alleged to have happened at the behest of Kim Jong-un. Besides, shelling across the Yeonpyeong islands in the Yellow Sea in November 2010 was done by North Korea. These instances give rise to concerns about the stability of the East Asian region, as Kim Jong-un is reported to have a personality as hard and uncompromising as that of his father. Therefore, Kim Jong Il's death is unlikely to lead towards resumption of the six-party talks aimed at getting North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme, which was stalled after North Korea quit after conducting missile tests in 2009.

Recently, North Korea signaled a willingness to freeze its uranium enrichment program in exchange for suspension of sanctions and a resumption of food aid; it seems highly unlikely to do so in practice. It would not give up its only significant strategic bargaining chip with the United States and the region.

North Korea's disastrous economic policies over the last six decades, recurrent food crisis in the country, if put together with struggle for preeminent position among the various elite-groups, is likely to provide excuses to these groups to increase their influence over the common masses. This also provides a small chance for bringing changes in the country.

Given the fact that China is North Korea's most important partner, it is very likely that North Korea's leader will take a trip to China sometime soon in the near future. All those who go this trip, will give the idea about North Korea's political

order, and shall also indicate the fact that internal situation has stabilised, as the new leader is confident that a coup will not take place in his absence.

India's concern in the region would be limited to its concerns for South Korea, and Japan. Still, it needs to be on guard on account of the developments in the Korean peninsula. Because, while Pakistan's transfer of sensitive uranium enrichment technology to North Korea destabilized the security scenario in East Asia region; North Korea's transfer of medium range missile technology to Pakistan brought many Indian cities under Pakistan's nuclear arsenal with the induction of 1,500 km range 'Ghauri' missile. As a consequence, any negative development in North Korea, if put together with Pakistan's own instability and power struggle, may have ramifications for the entire South Asian region. Nuclear Pakistan and North Korea, both allies of China, provides another dimension to remain wary about the developments in North Korea.

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