



View Point

North Korean Leadership Succession and Regional Security

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US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell has raised security concerns in the aftermath of leadership change in North Korea. During his visit to China, South Korea and Japan in the first week of January 2012, he has highlighted the alarming war signals sent across the DMZ by the new North Korean regime. After the death of its leader Kim Jong Il on December 17th last year, North Korea has been doing assertive posturing, conducting military exercises and related propaganda activities so as to mobilise support for Kim Jong Il's younger son Kim Jong-Un. The latter has avowed to penalise South Korean President Lee Myung-bak for not paying obeisance to his deceased father.

The succession battle apparently seems settled with anointment of Kim Jong-Un as North Korea's new leader. As expected, Kim Jong-Un took up the mantle of chairman of the National Defence Commission, chief of Korean People's Army and general secretary of the Workers' Party, the posts held by his father earlier. Kim Jong Il's sister Kim Kyong-Hui and brother-in-law Jang Sung-taek have been acting as regents to young heir. Kim Kyong-Hui holds a powerful Workers' Party post as politburo member while Jang Sung-taek is Vice chairman, National Defence Commission. However, there are apprehensions in the global community also that there would be 'dermal turbulence' within the 'epidermal posture' of national solidarity and peace. The lingering question is whether the Kim saga will come to an end or there would be players within the military establishment and ruling elite who will be willing to accommodate western interests and streamline

policy so as to have friendly relations with even South Korea? The funeral invitation extended to select South Korean nationals namely Lee Hee-Ho, wife of former President of South Korea Kim Dae Jung and Hyundai Group Chairperson Hyun Jung-Eun for attending Kim Jong Il funeral is one of the indications. At the same time North Korea had warned South Korea of unpredictable catastrophic consequences if it does not lift ban on South Koreans visiting North Korea to pay respect to Kim Jong Il. South Korea prosecutes its nationals who illegally visit North Korea with three years imprisonment.

North Korea might not like to be antagonistic towards its southern neighbour for the sake of regime stability and consolidation of power in the initial years; however it might warn South Korea occasionally to project Kim Jong-Un as a powerful leader. Therefore, South Korea has been on a high military alert along the demilitarised zone (DMZ) near its border and is strengthening its missile defence systems, purchasing new early warning missile detection radars and high-tech reconnaissance aircraft. Globally, there are serious apprehensions about the institutional arrangement in post-Kim Jong Il period. How the relatively novice and a greenhorn Kim Jong-Un would handle the pressure of politics and meet the expectations among the masses, remains an issue for debate, discussion and even conjectures. Kim Jong-Un might also nurture the ambition to unify the two Koreas through military aggression, a dream that his father had talked about in the past.

In the global debate, pros and cons of any regime change is carefully analysed but in North Korea there may be more upheavals than is superficially visible. His paternal aunt and her husband might not comply with the succession ethics and may try to nurture their own aspirations for gaining power. At this juncture it is prudent to visualise post regime collapse scenario that may emerge from political and military implosion or sudden death of any other important functionary of the government. Even an increase in hostilities across the DMZ, or any new missile tests by North Korea would jeopardise regional security in Northeast Asia. Given the context, it is fair to speculate the four major determinants which are very important at this stage.

- a) North Korean Ruling Elite acceptance of Kim Jong-Un as their leader.
- b) China's role in the case of the North Korea regime collapse or military aggression towards South Korea.

- c) North Korean people's perception about regime and the role of the western powers.
- d) Responses from regional players like South Korea and Japan.

The visit of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to China in the last week of December 2011 to discuss leadership succession in North Korea shows the concern which is emerging from the neighbouring countries of North Korea. China being one of the ardent supporters of the reclusive regime wants structured reforms in North Korea so as to make it financially independent within the Chinese sphere of influence. It was slightly annoyed in the wake of Cheonan incident and the nuclear standoff barb with US last year. Western nations would be keen to engage North Korea new ruler and Kim Jong-Un friends in Howard might also provide a clue to the establishment of links. The eldest son of Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Nam (ostracised from North Korea, currently based in Macao) is releasing a memoir about the perceptions of his father about ruling hierarchy and how he disliked his sons to succeed him. It has been felt that any natural disaster, prolonged food crisis and any other act of immaturity by Kim Jong-Un would create power strife among the larger cross section of North Korean generals and create problems for regime stability in the reclusive nation. This situation would tantamount to political catastrophe with problems for China because of Korean refugees, nuclear safety and the western intervention in the region. This would surely create power struggle in the region between US and China and also create sense of insecurity for South Korea which would seek its security under US nuclear umbrella.

India has followed a "wait and watch" policy with regard to developments in North Korea. As India has been nurturing close ties with South Korea and Japan, it needs to address their security concerns, as both are wary of the developments in North Korea. So, India must make policy pronouncements indicating that the change should be guided by the ideals of achieving greater peace and prosperity in Korean peninsula. Considering the situation, it is advisable that India sends a high level delegation to build ties with new regime, while highlighting India's earlier friendly gestures such as the 2011 Food Aid programme when it contributed US \$ 1 million.

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