



# Kim Jong-il's Death: Implications for North Korea's Stability and U.S. Policy

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## Summary

North Korea represents one of the United States' biggest foreign policy challenges due to its production and proliferation of nuclear weapons and missiles, the threat of attacks against South Korea, its record of human rights abuses, and the possibility that its internal problems could destabilize Northeast Asia. The North Korean government's December 19, 2011, announcement of the death of the country's "Dear Leader," Kim Jong-il, has the potential to be a watershed moment in the history of the Korean Peninsula and the region.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the death of his father, the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung, in 1994, Kim Jong-il had sat at the apex of a highly centralized, brutal regime. During his tenure, his regime subjected North Korea's people to profound impoverishment and massive food shortages, developed nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, and sold technology related to both programs abroad.

The effect of Kim Jong-il's death on North Korea's stability is uncertain. Many experts doubt that his anointed successor, his third son Kim Jong-un, will over the course of time be able to maintain effective control over his country due to his relative inexperience and the mounting internal and external pressures confronting North Korea. Yet, the North Korean regime under the elder Kim proved to be remarkably resilient, and many of the forces that held it together will continue to operate even if the young Kim himself remains weak. A key to the Kim Jong-un regime's stability will be its ability to continue obtaining and distributing funds, mostly from external sources. Of particular importance will be China's willingness to provide commercial, financial, and other support for the regime. Over the years, China reportedly has resisted repeated U.S. and South Korean attempts to discuss North Korea contingency plans. It is unclear whether Kim Jong-il's death will change this situation, though there have been calls to redouble outreach to Beijing. A possible opportunity for high-level dialogue could come in January 2012, when Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping visits Washington, DC. Xi is widely expected to be chosen as China's top leader over the coming year.

Very little is known about the inner workings of the North Korean elite, as evidenced by the U.S. and South Korean intelligence services' apparent surprise at the announcement of Kim Jong-il's death. Even less is known about Kim Jong-un, who is believed to be in his late 20s and to have attended primary school in Switzerland in the 1990s. Kim Jong-un was being groomed to be the successor since his father's August 2008 stroke that put a spotlight on the succession question.

In the days after the announcement, U.S. and South Korean officials issued statements that expressed support for the North Korean people, hope that the new leadership will continue recent diplomatic initiatives with Washington and Seoul, and a desire for a smooth transition in Pyongyang. (For the text of these statements as well as a joint message from several Chinese state and communist party organs, see the **Appendix**. U.S. and South Korean influence over events in North Korea is widely believed to be limited. In the coming weeks, the Obama Administration will be confronted with a decision of whether to persist with two proposed new agreements that reportedly were in the process of being concluded with the Kim Jong-il government in mid-December: a resumption of U.S. food assistance, and in return, a reported agreement by North Korea to shut down key sites of its nuclear program and open them to international monitoring.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Korean Central News Agency, "Notice to All Party Members, Servicepersons And People," December 19, 2011, accessed on the Open Source Center, KPP20111219971082.

<sup>2</sup> Howard LaFranchi, "Did Kim Jong-il Death Ruin Breakthrough Deal on North Korea Nukes?" *Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 2011. Since the mid-1990s, North Korea has suffered from chronic, massive food shortages. (continued...)

Members of Congress will have the opportunity to support or oppose these moves, as well as to propose new pressure and engagement tactics of their own.

## Developments from December 29, 2011 through early January 2012

- **Leadership transition.** North Korea's power centers appear to be consolidating around Kim Jong-un, at least as the country's nominal leader. The most tangible sign of this occurred on December 30, when a key organ of the Communist Party (officially the Workers' Party of Korea, or WPK) met and selected Kim as "Supreme Commander" of the North Korean military (officially, the Korean People's Army, or KPA).<sup>3</sup> Although North Korean propaganda outlets have been routinely referring to Kim Jong-un as "supreme leader" since Kim Jong-il died, this move by the WPK was the first actual position to be bestowed upon the younger Kim since. For the future, an indicator North Korea experts are watching is whether Kim Jong-un is named to other key positions, particularly Chairman of the National Defense Commission and/or General Secretary of the WPK Secretariat. Kim Jong-il held both titles, and used the National Defense Commission as his institutional base of power.<sup>4</sup>
- **North Korea's diplomacy.** In the weeks since Kim Jong-il's death, North Korean government organs and propaganda outlets have issued harsh rhetorical volleys at South Korea, which have been based upon the South Korean government's allegedly disrespectful reaction to Kim Jong-il's death. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's government issued a statement expressing its "its sympathy to the people of North Korea," but neither sent an official delegation to Pyongyang nor conveyed official condolences to the Kim family. Also, the North Korean government objected to Lee's prohibition on virtually all South Koreans from traveling to Pyongyang to pay their respects.<sup>5</sup> On this pretext, the North Korean agency for handling relations with Seoul declared that in the future, "there is nothing to expect from the inter-Korean relations" and "there is no reason for us to say anything" to the Lee government during the remaining thirteen months of Lee's term.<sup>6</sup> North Korea has issued similar statements in the past, only to re-engage in inter-Korean talks later.

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Food aid—largely from China, South Korea, and the United States—has been essential in filling the gap. The United States has not sent large-scale food assistance since 2009, when disagreements with the North Korean government led to the cessation of the last aid program.

<sup>3</sup> The specific WPK organ that met was the Political Bureau of the party's Central Committee. The December 30 gathering was only the 11<sup>th</sup> of its kind. The last such meeting was held in June 2011. Prior to then, the Political Bureau had not been convened since 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Jong-il became NDC chairman in April 1993, more than a year before the death of Kim Il-sung, his father and predecessor as North Korean leader. Kim Jong-il became WPK General Secretary in October 1997.

<sup>5</sup> The South Korean government made exceptions for the family members of the late President Kim Dae-jung and the late Chairman Chung Mong-hun of the Hyundai Group to attend the funeral services in return for the North's dispatch of delegations to their funerals in 2010 and 2003, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Korean Central News Agency, "CPRF Statement Decries Lee Myung Bak Group's 'Thrice-Cursed Crimes'," (continued...)

In statements regarding the United States, North Korea has appeared to take a rhetorically more confrontational stance than in the weeks before Kim Jong-il's death. For instance, the annual New Year's message of January 1, 2012, for the first time in four years emphasized the government's demand that U.S. troops withdraw from South Korea.<sup>7</sup> Also, on January 11, the North Korean official media criticized the United States for "politicizing" bilateral negotiations over food aid by allegedly insisting that food be given only if North Korea agrees to concessions on its nuclear program.<sup>8</sup>

- **Regional diplomacy.** In a sign of the dialogue occurring among the various powers in Northeast Asia, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell visited Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo in from January 3-7. He told reporters in Tokyo that he had made clear the U.S. position "that North Korea must refrain from any acts that could create a disturbance on the Korean Peninsula." He added that, "we've particularly passed that message directly to our senior Chinese interlocutors."<sup>9</sup> South Korean President Lee Myung-bak traveled to Beijing for a January 9-11 state visit. At the end of the South Korean leader's visit to China, the two sides issues a joint press communique in which they pledged their commitment to maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, and to working with the international community to create conditions for resumption of the Six-Party Talks.<sup>10</sup>

## North Korea's Stability

One notable feature of official U.S. and South Korean reactions to Kim Jong-il's death is the extent to which both governments have publicly stated their desire for North Korea to remain stable.<sup>11</sup> Instability in North Korea would pose a number of challenges and possibly threats to the United States, South Korea, and the region. Perhaps the most worrisome are the possibilities that controls over North Korea's nuclear materials might loosen, that a weak leadership in Pyongyang could lash out militarily, and that a power vacuum could suck U.S., South Korean, and Chinese military forces into North Korea.

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December 31, 2011, as displayed on the Open Source Center KPP20111231971048.

<sup>7</sup> Korean Central Broadcasting Station, "Full Text of DPRK's 2012 New Year's Joint Editorial," January 1, 2012, as translated from the Korean by the Open Source Center, KPP20120101045001.

<sup>8</sup> Agence France Presse, "DPRK FM Spokesman Says US Offered Food Aid for Nuclear Shutdown," January 11, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Assistant Secretary Kurt M. Campbell Remarks to the Media at the Imperial Hotel," press release, January 7, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Xinhua News Agency, "China, ROK stress stability on Korean Peninsula," *China Daily*, January 11, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> In December 19, 2011, remarks during an appearance Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "We both [the United States and Japan] share a common interest in a peaceful and stable transition in North Korea, as well as in ensuring regional peace and stability." State Department, "Hillary Rodham Clinton Remarks With Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Gemba After Their Meeting," December 19, 2011. In delivering the South Korean government's official expression of sympathy to the North Korean people, Minister of Unification Yu Woo-ik said, "We hope that North Korea will regain stability as soon as possible so that South and North will be able to cooperate for the peace and prosperity of the Korean peninsula." The Blue House, "ROK Government Statement on Demise of Kim Jong Il," December 20, 2011.

In the coming months, both stabilizing and destabilizing dynamics will be operating simultaneously inside North Korea. It is likely that cohesive tendencies will predominate in the short run, as members of the ruling elite rally around Kim Jong-un, as has been seen by members of the ruling elite paying their respects to the new ruler in the days since his father's death. In particular, most analysts expect that the regime collective will strive to maintain unity at least until April 2012, when the country is planning to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of founder Kim Il-Sung. However, over time, few would be surprised if tensions were to mount among the power centers of the North Korean system.

## **Divisive Forces**

Kim Jong-il's death, which officially occurred on December 17, has long been high on most North Korea-watchers' lists of events that could trigger the collapse of the North Korean regime.<sup>12</sup> The untested Kim Jong-un, who is thought to be in his late 20s, has had less than two years to consolidate his power base, in contrast to the more than two decades of on-the-job training his father enjoyed before he became the country's supreme leader in 1994. Perhaps most importantly, while almost nothing is known about the younger Kim, it is believed that he has only weak ties to and authority over the Korean People's Army (KPA, as the North Korean military is known), arguably the country's most important center of power. Indeed, some speculate that Kim's presumed domestic weakness could lead North Korea to launch a small-scale military provocation, such as a third nuclear test, in 2012 as a way to bolster his leadership.

Moreover, ruling North Korea today is far more complex than it was during the country's last leadership transition in 1994, upon the death of Kim Jong-il's father, the country's founder and "Great Leader" Kim Il-Sung. Two decades of chronic food shortages—which peaked in the famine of the late 1990s that killed between 5%-10% of the country's approximately 22 million people—have caused the breakdown of the state-run distribution system and the emergence of official and clandestine markets, as ordinary North Koreans have had to fend for themselves to feed their families. More North Koreans are exposed to the outside world than ever before. Some venture back and forth into China, own cell phones, have access to foreign radio and television broadcasts, and are able to purchase foreign products. The police state has become highly corruptible, and access to foreign exchange has become a new path to power and protection. The "Great Successor," as Kim Jong-un has been dubbed by the official North Korean media, has had little time to gain experience managing various personal and group interests that have proliferated among the North Korean elite. Many North Korea experts will be watching for signs that these groups and individuals—including one or both of Kim Jong-un's older brothers—are maneuvering to assert themselves and their interests.

## **Unifying Forces**

Despite the array of challenges, there are several forces that are likely to hold the regime together, particularly in the short run. While Kim Jong-un is untested, his chances of remaining in power and consolidating his base are far greater today than they were in 2008, when his father is believed to have suffered from a serious stroke that may have incapacitated him for a time. The two Kims have had more than two years to engineer Kim Jong-un's succession by eliminating

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<sup>12</sup> Victor Cha, "The Death of the DPRK Leader," CSIS Korea Chair Critical Questions, December 19, 2011.

potential opponents, elevating loyalists, securing his appointments to key posts, and obtaining China's blessing for the transition from father to son.

Among Kim Jong-un's most important supporters are believed to his aunt and uncle (Kim Jong-il's sister and her husband), Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song Taek. Both have been given important positions over the past 19 months, and Jang in particular is expected to act as a type of regent, though some have also speculated that he could try to relegate Kim Jong-un to the role of a figurehead. Before his death, the elder Kim appears to have begun to decentralize the country's decision-making structure, which had been concentrated to a remarkable degree in his hands. Thus, it is possible that a collective form of leadership will emerge, perhaps centered in the National Defense Commission, with Kim Jong-un as its face.<sup>13</sup> Another possibility is that more influence shifts to the communist party (officially called the Workers' Party of Korea, or WPK), where many North Korea watchers believe Kim Jong-un has a firmer base.<sup>14</sup> Many will be watching Kim Jong-il's December 28 memorial service, to see who among North Korea's elite attends and where they are ranked in importance. Indeed, the service is likely to offer a unique glimpse into North Korean elite politics, which is among the most opaque aspects in an opaque country.

Additionally, the powers of the North Korean state remain significant, as indicated by the smooth way the regime handled Kim Jong-il's death.<sup>15</sup> The North Korean government delayed announcing Kim Jong-il's death for more than 50 hours. (By comparison, in 1994, the government waited approximately 30 hours to announce Kim il-Sung's death.) During the delay, there are reports that the government closed some markets, partially shut down the border with China, and notified members of the ruling elite.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the regime was apparently able to carry out these operations, maintain secrecy, and operate the machinery of a transition without any major difficulties to date is an indication of the continued power of the state apparatus that the new leadership has inherited. Along these lines, it is possible that in the weeks and months to come, the Kim Jong-un regime will seek to continue the "softer" approach Kim Jong-il took for most of 2011, including the apparent food aid and nuclear agreements with the United States.

Perhaps most importantly, the members of the elite are widely believed to have a strong interest in maintaining the status quo, which has enriched many of them and their families. In contrast, a sudden collapse of the government could unleash forces that eventually could lead to the loss of the established classes' wealth, privilege, and—in some cases—even life. The legitimacy and longevity of Kim Jong-un's reign is likely to be tied to his regime's ability to continue funneling money and gifts to the elite families. Thus, an important factor in North Korea's future is the government's access to outside funds. China is the key external player in this regard. Since 2008, when South Korea began curtailing most of its engagement with North Korea, China has emerged as North Korea's dominant economic partner, accounting for well over half of its trade and the lion's share of its inbound foreign direct investment, according to most estimates. Moreover, in

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<sup>13</sup> The National Defense Commission generally was Kim Jong-il's preferred tool of governance. Kim chaired the NDC. In contrast, Kim Jong-un does not have a seat on the commission, though his uncle Jang Song-Taek was made a vice-chairman in 2010. Before Kim Jong-il's death, many speculated that the next move in the succession process would be appointing the younger Kim to the NDC.

<sup>14</sup> In 2010, Kim Jong-un was named one of two vice chairmen of the WPK's Central Military Commission. For more, see Andray Abrahamian, "The Key Question," *38 North*, available at <http://38north.org/2011/12/abrahamian122211/>.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this point, see Evans J.R. Revere, "Dealing with North Korea's New Leader: Getting it Right," December 21, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/1221\\_north\\_korea\\_revere.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/1221_north_korea_revere.aspx).

<sup>16</sup> Choi Song Min and Kang Mi Jin, "Armed Troops at 4m Intervals," *The Daily NK*, December 19, 2011.

late 2009, Beijing began providing more diplomatic support to North Korea, perhaps in an attempt to boost its influence as Kim Jong-il's health waned. Following Kim Jong-il's death, Chinese leaders have taken steps to indicate their support and solidarity with North Korea. For instance, every member of the China's highest level government body, the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo, visited the DPRK Embassy in Beijing to express condolences.<sup>17</sup>

## Implications and Options for the United States

Traditionally, the United States has had a number of goals with respect to North Korea, including limiting if not curtailing North Korea's ability to sell its nuclear and long-range missile technology, rolling back or containing its nuclear and missile programs, deterring an attack on South Korea, and improving the lives of the average North Korean people.

Kim Jong-il's death can be viewed as something of a Rorschach test for one's opinion of North Korea policy. Many who were inclined to favor negotiating with North Korea will likely argue that recent developments present an opportunity for engagement, while those seeking a harder-line approach will strongly disagree. The United States faces a range of options, many of which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but all of which entail risks.

## Seek Opportunities for Engagement

Some have argued that the United States and South Korea should seek to engage the new leadership in North Korea, to probe its intentions.<sup>18</sup> At a minimum, such an outreach conceivably could create disincentives for North Korea to take provocative actions, which some argue tend not to happen when North Korea is more engaged with the outside world. The year 2011 was one of these periods of a North Korean "charm offensive," when North Korea refrained from any military provocations while it asked the outside world for food donations, announced new economic projects with China and Russia, and sought to reopen the moribund Six-Party Talks over its nuclear programs.<sup>19</sup> Many believe it is likely that the country's new leadership will continue along this path, since the leaders were already in positions of influence while these policies were formulated. Some analysts argue that without such engagement, North Korean nuclear weapons and missile development will proceed unchecked.<sup>20</sup> Engagement could serve as

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<sup>17</sup> Another notable outreach was a December 19 condolence message from all the major arms of the Chinese Government and the Chinese Communist Party. See the **Appendix** for the text of the statement, which according to one source contains a more positive assessment of bilateral ties than in the comparable message in 1994. Open Source Center Analysis, "China Moves To Strengthen Ties With DPRK After Kim Jong Il's Death," CPF20111221554001 China, December 21, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Leon V. Sigal, "The Future of U.S.-North Korea Relations," *The National Interest*, December 21, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> The participants in the negotiations are North Korea, the United States, China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia. The Six Party Talks over North Korea's nuclear program began under the George W. Bush Administration. With China playing host, multiple rounds were held from 2003-2008, yielding occasional incremental progress and some apparent breakthroughs, including the disablement of key parts of North Korea's plutonium nuclear facilities. Ultimately, however, the talks had not resolved the fundamental issue of North Korean nuclear arms. They were last convened in late 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Joel Wit and Jenny Town, "Stopping the Nuclear North," *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2011. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/26/nuclear\\_north?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/26/nuclear_north?page=full)

a way to at least slow nuclear weapon and missile development in North Korea, even if the ultimate goal of denuclearization is not fulfilled in the near future.

More ambitiously, it is conceivable that successful international negotiations with the United States and its allies could empower more moderate forces inside North Korea by allowing them to present diplomatic and economic achievements as an alternative to more bellicose options. In this vein, some analysts see Kim Jong-un as a possible symbol of the generational change that is taking place inside North Korea, in which a younger, more cosmopolitan group is poised to exert increasing influence, with perhaps a greater interest in economic reforms and rolling back the country's weapons of mass destruction programs.<sup>21</sup> Most, though by no means all, North Korea watchers doubt the likelihood of this optimistic scenario.

## **Increase Pressure on the Regime**

Few North Korea watchers believe North Korea's leaders will ever completely dismantle the country's nuclear weapons and long-range missile capabilities. Under Kim Jong-il, North Korea not only used these to deter an attack by the United States and its allies, but also as a means of extracting aid and other benefits from the outside world. Maintaining a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program appears to have become integral to the regime's survival. Moreover, engagement risks providing North Korea with time and resources (indirectly) that could be used to refine its WMD capabilities, such as miniaturizing a nuclear warhead so that it is capable of being mounted on a long or medium range missile. Thus, some argue that the best, and perhaps only, way to neutralize the North Korean threat is by promoting regime change. In this line of thinking Kim's death presents an opportunity to actively seek to undermine the new regime.

One set of options short of an outright military strike, which few if any advocate, revolves around aggressive steps such as psychological operations and unconventional attacks to try to destabilize the regime. However, the low probability of success and the high risk of triggering unrestrained warfare make these options unpalatable to all but the most hard-line advocates. While North Korea's small conventional attacks against South Korea in 2010 showed that that status quo could be costly, these costs generally are not thought to be sufficiently high as to justify an attempt to topple the regime in the short run.

Instead, opponents of engagement often call for halting initiatives that provide benefits to North Korea, for stepping up interdiction efforts of nuclear and missile technology and other trade, and for ratcheting up economic, diplomatic, and military pressure against Pyongyang.<sup>22</sup> One particular pressure point are the various North Korean individuals and entities that are charged with obtaining hard currency and foreign goods that the Kim regime has distributed to key members of the elite and the state apparatus.<sup>23</sup> A weakness of the aggressive pressure approach is that China would likely be able to neutralize it by increasing its aid and support to Pyongyang, unless leaders

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Hayes, Scott Bruce, and David von Hippel, "Kim Jong Il's Death Suggests Continuity Plus Opportunity to Engage," Nautilus Institute Policy Forum, December 19, 2011, <http://www.nautilus.org/publications/essays/napsnet/forum>.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Blumenthal, "Vicious Kim Regime Lives," *National Review Online*, December 19, 2011. <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/286142/vicious-kim-regime-lives-dan-blumenthal>

<sup>23</sup> Michael Mazza, "How the US Can capitalize on Kim Jong Il's Death," *The Daily Caller*, December 20, 2011. <http://dailycaller.com/2011/12/19/how-the-us-can-capitalize-on-kim-jong-ils-death/>



in Beijing make a dramatic shift and at least tacitly allow the imposition of economic and diplomatic penalties on North Korea. China has long seen stability on the Korean Peninsula as its primary interest, and therefore been loathe to apply too much pressure on the regime. A dramatic Chinese turnabout on North Korea policy may have become less likely due to the Obama Administration's announcement of a "rebalancing" of U.S. foreign policy and military priorities toward the Pacific. Many Chinese leaders believe that this so-called "pivot" is aimed at containing Chinese ambitions, and therefore could become more suspicious of U.S. intentions with North Korea.

A less antagonistic set of pressure options are what some have called "subversive engagement."<sup>24</sup> These moves would involve the United States and South Korea aggressively attempting to further delegitimize the Kim regime by increasing elite and ordinary North Koreans' exposure to the outside world through such policies as increasing joint economic ventures, radio broadcasts, swamping North Korea markets with South Korean digital media, and setting up exchange and visitor programs. An advantage of these options is that many of them could be combined with any other approach, be it hard engagement or hard pressure. A disadvantage is that they likely will take years to have an impact, and in the meantime many could channel funds and support to the regime.

## **Maintain a Dual Track Approach**

Since the middle of 2009, the Obama Administration and South Korea's Lee Myung-bak government in effect have adopted a joint approach toward North Korea, often called "strategic patience," that has utilized both engagement and pressure, with an emphasis on the latter. In essence, the approach has had four main components:

- keeping the door open to Six-Party Talks over North Korea's nuclear program but refusing to re-start them without a North Korean assurance that it would take "irreversible steps" to denuclearize;
- insisting that Six-Party Talks and/or U.S.-North Korean talks must be preceded by North-South Korean talks on denuclearization and improvements in North-South Korean relations;
- gradually attempting to alter China's strategic assessment of North Korea; and
- responding to Pyongyang's provocations by tightening sanctions against North Korean entities, conducting a series of military exercises, and expanding cooperation with Japan.

Strategic patience could be described as a passive-aggressive approach that effectively is a policy of containing North Korea's proliferation activities, rather than rolling back its nuclear program. Indeed, underlying the approach is an expectation that North Korea will almost certainly not relinquish its nuclear capabilities. One drawback is that it has allowed Pyongyang to control the day-to-day situation. While Washington and Seoul wait to react to Pyongyang's moves, the criticism runs, North Korea has continued to develop its uranium enrichment program, solidified support from China, and has embarked on a propaganda offensive designed to shape the eventual negotiating agenda to its benefit.

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<sup>24</sup> Andrei Lankov, "The North Korean Paradox And The Subversive Truth," *Asian Outlook*, March 3, 2009.

The Obama and Lee governments' diplomacy with North Korea in late 2011 appear to be efforts to become more proactive on the engagement side of the ledger. The moves appear to be at least partially motivated by a desire to reduce North Korea's incentives to behave provocatively. And, they are made possible by signs that North Korea has softened its negotiating position, at least on a short-term basis.

## **Possible Next Steps**

In the coming days, one item the North Koreans will be watching is whether President Obama himself offers an expression of sympathy, as Bill Clinton did after Kim Il-sung died.<sup>25</sup> Looking farther ahead, after the initial mourning period has ended in on December 29, the Obama Administration will have an opportunity to test the new leadership's intentions, by virtue of U.S.-North Korea proposed agreements that were in various stages of negotiation. If Pyongyang proposes, and the Obama Administration welcomes, a new date for a round of bilateral talks with the United States that had been scheduled for the week of December 18, and if these talks are constructive, this would perhaps be the best indication that the regime intends to continue Kim Jong-il's most recent charm offensive. Reportedly, North Korea had agreed to a freeze on its uranium enrichment plant and international monitoring at the Yongbyon nuclear site, and to a nuclear and missile testing moratorium.<sup>26</sup> In return, the Obama Administration reportedly had at least come close to agreeing in principle to resume large-scale shipments of food aid, labeled "nutritional assistance." Press reports indicate that the amount was 240,000 metric tonnes (MT), to be spread out over the coming two years, and that North Korean authorities consented to allow more rigorous monitoring by international aid officials of the food shipments inside North Korea. One possible sign that the two countries will continue working together occurred shortly after Kim Jong-il's death was announced, when U.S. officials discussed "technical details" of monitoring of the aid with their counterparts at the North Korean mission to the United Nations.<sup>27</sup> Food aid to North Korea has been controversial ever since the United States began providing donations in the mid-1990s. In 2011, the House passed a measure—which the Senate rejected—that would have prohibited the Administration from using the primary U.S. food aid program to send food assistance to North Korea.<sup>28</sup>

By increasing the possibility of instability inside North Korea, Kim Jong-il's death has highlighted the value of discussing North Korean contingencies among the major powers involved in North Korean matters. Previous South Korean governments generally avoided this

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<sup>25</sup> "On behalf of the people of the United States, I extend sincere condolences to the people of North Korea on the death of President Kim Il Sung," the President Bill Clinton statement said. "We appreciate his leadership in resuming the talks between our governments. We hope they will continue as appropriate." Elise Labott, "North Korea-U.S. Deal for Food Aid Was in the Works," CNN.com, December 19, 2011, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/12/19/sending-condolences-to-north-korea-a-delicate-task>.

<sup>26</sup> "US Aid a Step Toward Korea Nuke Talks," *Associated Press*, December 18, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Daily Press Briefing, Victoria Nuland, State Department Spokesperson, Washington, DC, December 21, 2011. The U.S.-North Korea conversation was by phone.

<sup>28</sup> Specifically, on June 15, 2011, the House passed by voice vote an amendment proposed by Congressman Edward Royce to H.R. 2112, the FY2012 Agriculture Appropriations Act, that would have prohibited the Administration from using the primary U.S. food aid program to send food assistance to North Korea. The Senate version of the bill, passed on November 1, contained no such measure. Participants in the House-Senate conference committee decided to strip the Royce amendment's tougher restrictions, replacing it with language (Section 741) that food assistance may only be provided if "adequate monitoring and controls" exist. President Obama signed H.R. 2112 (P.L. 112-55) into law on November 18, 2011.

planning, for fear that it would jeopardize the “sunshine” policies of engaging North Korea.<sup>29</sup> South Korea dropped this reluctance after the 2008 inauguration of the conservative Lee government, combined with Kim Jong-il’s declining health and Pyongyang’s increasingly provocative behavior. Trilateral discussions with Japanese officials have also taken place. However, over the years, China reportedly has resisted repeated U.S. and South Korean attempts to discreetly discuss North Korea contingency plans, even over issues such as coordinating a response to a natural disaster or a nuclear accident. It is unclear whether Kim Jong-il’s death will change this situation. In the wake of the changing leadership situation in Pyongyang, a number of commentators have called on the Obama and Lee governments to redouble their behind-the-scenes efforts to hold these conversations with their Chinese counterparts.<sup>30</sup> Three possible opportunities for high-level dialogue could present themselves in the coming weeks. First, in late December, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda will travel to Beijing for a meeting with top Chinese leaders. Then, in January 2012, Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping is to visit Washington, DC, for a trip that also was previously scheduled. Xi is widely expected to be chosen as China’s top leader over the coming year. Also in January, South Korean President Lee will travel to China to meet with Chinese President Hu Jintao, a trip that was arranged after Kim Jong-il’s death.

## **Selected CRS Reports on North and South Korea**

CRS Report R41259, *North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy, and Internal Situation*, by (name redacted)

CRS Report R41481, *U.S.-South Korea Relations*, coordinated by (name redacted)

CRS Report R40095, *Foreign Assistance to North Korea*, by (name redacted) and Mary Beth Nikitin

CRS Report RL34256, *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons: Technical Issues*, by Mary Beth Nikitin

CRS Report R41438, *North Korea: Legislative Basis for U.S. Economic Sanctions*, by (name redacted)

CRS Report R41843, *Imports from North Korea: Existing Rules, Implications of the KORUS FTA, and the Kaesong Industrial Complex*, coordinated by (name redacted)

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<sup>29</sup> Victor Cha, “We Have No Plan,” Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online 08-046A, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008, <http://www.nautilus.org/publications/essays/napsnet/forum/security/08046Cha.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Paal, “North Korea: Time for Secret Talks with China,” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Asia Pacific Brief, December 21, 2011. For a more comprehensive list of steps the U.S. could take to prepare for various North Korean contingencies, written before Kim Jong-il’s death, see Bruce Klingner, “Leadership Change in North Korea—What it Means for the U.S.,” April 7, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/04/>.

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## **Appendix. Official Statements from the United States, South Korea, and China**

### **The United States**

The State Department

The Passing of National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il

Press Statement

Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Secretary of State

Washington, DC

December 19, 2011

With the passing of National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is now in a period of national mourning. We are deeply concerned with the well being of the North Korean people and our thoughts and prayers are with them during these difficult times. It is our hope that the new leadership of the DPRK will choose to guide their nation onto the path of peace by honoring North Korea's commitments, improving relations with its neighbors, and respecting the rights of its people. The United States stands ready to help the North Korean people and urges the new leadership to work with the international community to usher in a new era of peace, prosperity and lasting security on the Korean Peninsula.

PRN: 2011/2174

### **South Korea**

The Blue House

December 20, 2011

Minister of Unification Yu Woo-ik announced the following Government statement agreed at a ministerial meeting on foreign affairs and security today.

Fellow citizens, the Government is thoroughly monitoring the current situation while working closely with allies and neighbors so that peace on the Korean Peninsula will not be shaken by the sudden death of the North Korean National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il.

Our Armed Forces are now maintaining high alert and bracing for any possible contingency. No unusual signs have yet been detected in the North.

It is hoped that all citizens will go about their daily routines as usual without anxiety so that economic activities will not contract.

Concerning the death of Chairman Kim Jong Il, the South Korean Government expresses its sympathy to the people of North Korea.

The Government hopes North Korea will soon restore stability so that both Koreas will be able to work together for the sake of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula.

Considering that North Korea is in a mourning period, the Government decided to advise the religious community not to proceed with the lighting of Christmas trees in front-line areas this year, which was scheduled for December 23.

We ask our fellow Koreans to cope with the situation in North Korea in a calm and resolute manner, while cooperating with the Government's policies.

Statement by the Ministry of Unification on visits to North Korea for paying condolence calls.

Concerning the dispatch of delegations to the North's funeral services, the Government has decided not to send an official delegation. However, the Government will allow family members of the late President Kim Dae-jung and Chairman Chung Mong-hun of the Hyundai Group to attend the funeral services in return for the North's dispatch of delegations to their funerals held in the South.

## **China**

As appeared in Xinhua Domestic Service in Chinese, translated from by the Open Source Center, CPP20111219004011, Beijing 1310 GMT, 19 Dec 2011.

Beijing, 19 Dec (Xinhua) - The CPC Central Committee, the National People's Congress [NPC] Standing Committee, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission [CMC] sent a message of condolences to the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea [WPK], the WPK Central Military Commission, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK] National Defense Commission, the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK, and the DPRK Cabinet ON 19 December to express deep condolences over the death of Comrade Kim Jong Il, general secretary of the WPK, chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission, and supreme commander of the Korean People's Army [KPA]. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi summoned Pak Myong Ho, charge d'affaires of the DPRK Embassy in Beijing and handed to him the message of condolences. The message reads in full as follows:

Pyongyang

The WPK Central Committee

The WPK Central Military Commission

The DPRK National Defense Commission

The Presidium of the DPRK Supreme People's Assembly

The DPRK Cabinet:

We were shocked to learn of the unfortunate demise of Comrade Kim Jong Il, general secretary of the WPK, chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission and supreme commander of the KPA. With incomparable sorrow, we hereby extend our most profound condolences and our most sincere sympathy to the DPRK people on his demise.

Comrade Kim Jong Il was a great leader of the WPK and the DPRK people who dedicated the whole of his life and rendered immortal service to the great cause of the DPRK people in building a DPRK-style powerful and prosperous socialist country.

Comrade Kim Jong Il, a close friend of the Chinese people, had carried on and further developed with utmost enthusiasm the traditional friendship between China and the DPRK, which was established and cultivated by the revolutionaries of the older generation of the two countries. He had established profound friendship with Chinese leaders and had strongly pushed forward the development of the China-DPRK good-neighborly friendly and cooperative relationship. The Chinese party, government, and people were deeply saddened by the passing away of Comrade Kim Jong Il, who will be remembered forever by the Chinese people.

Even though Comrade Kim Jong Il has passed away, he will live forever in the hearts of the DPRK people. We believe that the DPRK people will carry forward his unfulfilled wishes, rally closely around the WPK, and under the leadership of Comrade Kim Cho'ng-u'n" [Kim Jong Un], turn their sorrow into strength, continuously advance toward the goal of building a strong and prosperous socialist nation and achieving sustained peace on the Korean Peninsula.

China and the DPRK are good neighbors linked by mountains and waters and stand together, sharing weal and woe. It is the consistent policy of the Chinese party and government to make constant efforts to consolidate and develop the traditional friendly and cooperative relations between China and the DPRK. We firmly believe that through joint efforts, friendship between the Chinese and DPRK parties, states, and peoples will continuously consolidate and develop. The Chinese people will stand together with the DPRK people forever!

Eternal Glory to Comrade Kim Jong Il!

[By] The CPC Central Committee

The NPC Standing Committee of the PRC

The State Council of the PRC

The Central Military Commission of the PRC

[Dated] 19 December 2011 in Beijing

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