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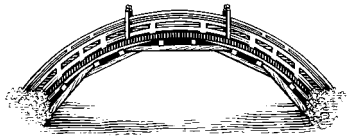
POLICY Q&A

Political Change in the DPRK



An interview with

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Although the succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un appears to be going smoothly, prominent commentary in both the United States and South Korea has again raised the question of whether the North Korean regime might collapse. Continuing economic difficulties, acute food shortages, and sporadic reports of protests—even if small scale—have fueled this speculation. Is North Korea vulnerable to the types of revolutions sweeping the Middle East?

This Q&A presents an interview by *Asia Policy*'s editor, Andrew Marble, on political change in North Korea with Stephan Haggard, Krause Distinguished Professor at the Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, University of California–San Diego, and Daniel Pinkston, Senior Analyst and Deputy Project Director for North East Asia at the International Crisis Group in Seoul. This Q&A is divided into two sections:

- pp. 132–36 examine the prospects for political change in North Korea
- pp. 136–39 consider the implications of these changes for North Korea's foreign and military policy

THE PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

Andrew Marble: *There are multiple signs of a formal transition in leadership in North Korea. Can you outline these developments?*

Stephan Haggard: Monarchical systems solve one very important succession problem: a hereditary heir provides a clear focal point and thus prevents overt conflicts about who will occupy the throne. The designation of Kim Jong-un as heir apparent is no longer in question; this is manifest in his elevation to positions that are important stepping stones to the ultimate consolidation of power. One day before the party conference last September, Kim Jong-il promoted both his sister Kim Kyong-hui and Kim Jong-un to the rank of four-star general even though neither had served a single day in the military. During the party conference last fall, Kim Jong-un was elected as one of the two vice chairmen of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Central Military Commission (CMC), which is not to be confused with the more powerful National Defense Commission (NDC) from which Kim Jong-il currently rules. Kim Jong-un was also appointed to the Party Central Committee. The hereditary succession is in full swing.

Daniel Pinkston: Yet at the same time we also see efforts to design an institutional structure that will maintain Kim Jong-il's power, bring important stakeholders to the table, and check potential challengers. In spring 2009, the constitution was revised to elevate Kim Jong-il—as well as his *songun* (military first) ideology—to a status approaching that of his father, Kim Il-sung. The NDC—the core ruling body—added four members, increasing in size from eight to twelve (the first vice chairman died in November 2010 and has not been replaced). This move expanded the inner circle and increased the capacity of the institution to manage a broader range of state affairs; its staff appears to be growing as well and becoming more like a functioning administrative entity. Kim Jong-un is not currently a member of the NDC, but he could become its chairman—with all the powers the position enjoys—when his father dies. Alternatively he could rule through another institution, such as the CMC, following his father's pattern of leaving the office of the presidency as an eternal memorial to Kim Il-sung.

Marble: *We have seen a flurry of meetings of official bodies recently, including a party conference and a convening of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA). Are these "rubber stamp" bodies or do these meetings have significance?*

Pinkston: The SPA—the highest organ of the government—is indeed a rubber stamp body. Although it provided the opportunity for the announcement of new appointments, the meeting was a regularly scheduled one. The convening of a KWP conference in September 2010 was more unusual. According to the party's bylaws, a full party congress is supposed to be held every five years, but none had been held since the Sixth Party Congress in 1980. Even the Central Committee appeared moribund, and many high-ranking KWP positions had become vacant through attrition. The replenishing of party institutions served two functions. First, it restored capacity to organs that were inactive. Second, the new appointees owe their positions and new status to Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un. As in all Communist systems, promotions are crucial currency in buying support, including for the hereditary transition itself.

Marble: *What political role does the military play in the system? Is this becoming a military regime?*

Pinkston: The succession from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il in 1994 occurred in extraordinarily trying times, just after the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) had been abandoned by a collapsing Soviet Union. As the

capacity of the state and party declined during the great famine in the 1990s, Kim Jong-il turned to the military and security apparatuses as key bases of support. He even identified the military as the exemplary institution that would lead the country on the path to becoming a "strong and prosperous nation." The "hostile environment" since the onset of the nuclear crisis in 2002 has only strengthened the role of the military in the political system. It would be inaccurate to say that North Korea is a military regime. But the leadership has chosen to elevate the ideological and political role of the military, and the subordination of the military to the party is much less clear than in other Communist systems.

In any party-dominant authoritarian system, the military poses a potential challenge. The leadership needs military support, but the more power the military has, the more beholden the leadership is to it. And, of course, there is always the risk of an outright coup. Recent developments reflect these cross-cutting pressures. In April 2010, Kim Jong-il promoted 100 general officers on the occasion of his father's birthday. The number of promotions was second only to the 129 he made in 1997 as the country was reeling from the famine. But looking at the top state institutions and personnel, it is noteworthy that, except for Kim Jong-il, power is divided in complex ways to check challengers. For example, Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho is considered a guardian of Kim Jong-un in the military. He was recently promoted to vice marshal or five-star general and is one of only four members of the Politburo Standing Committee. But he is not a member of the NDC. Chang Song-taek, whom many have considered a possible successor, is married to Kim Jong-il's younger sister and is one of four vice chairmen on the NDC. However, he is only an alternative member of the Politburo and does not have influence or control over the military or security apparatus. Although fissures at the top are not impossible, Kim Jong-il appears to have used appointments and divide-and-conquer tactics to keep supporters in line.

Marble: *If the regime is unlikely to crack at the top, what are the prospects for a Middle East scenario or even a collapse of the regime?*

Haggard: Many democratic transitions occur in semi-authoritarian systems that allow some play for social forces and even opposition parties. In Poland, the unions played a role. In the Philippines, the church supported the "people power" movement. In Egypt, citizens used social networking sites to organize protests. North Korea, however, lacks the sorts of civil society institutions that could support a sustained challenge to the regime from below.

Marble: *But economic conditions, including even the provision of basic necessities such as food, seem to be deteriorating. Wouldn't these conditions at some point create a backlash?*

Haggard: The response to extreme deprivation in a fraying state socialist system is not necessarily political. A new book that I authored with Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation*, reports on two surveys of North Korean refugees, one conducted in China and the second in South Korea. We found that the vast majority of respondents were engaged in market-oriented activity. Nearly 45% of the respondents in one survey received all their income from the market. This market activity is not specifically political, but it does constitute what James Scott calls an "everyday form of resistance" to deprivation and repression.[1] The emergence of the market could create a space for civil society to emerge.

Not surprisingly, the regime has been quite concerned about this sort of activity. Since the attempted reforms of 2002, the regime has periodically allowed markets to function, but has also not hesitated to curtail such activity when deemed necessary. The most dramatic of these control efforts was the disastrous currency conversion of December 2009, which effectively confiscated the working capital of entrepreneurs and traders.

Marble: *If the North Korean system is unlikely to collapse suddenly, what are the prospects for some kind of reform or liberalization that might ease the most repressive elements of the system?*

Haggard: An advantage—if we can call it that—of authoritarian regimes is that they can turn on a dime. If the succession succeeds, Kim Jong-un could choose to emulate the gradual reformism visible in China. But the constraints on the North Korean leadership at the moment are tight. The military is quite powerful. Not only is it reluctant to make concessions on the security front but it also may resist economic reform. Reform would challenge important prerogatives, including a bloated budget and control over a variety of moneymaking activities. But Andrei Lankov has pointed out the deeper political and ideological dilemma for the regime. If the DPRK pursues a reformist course, it can at best aspire to be a second-rate South Korea. The refugees we interviewed showed absolutely no support for a "third way" in which North Korea would retain its independence and pursue a reformist

[1] See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

course; virtually all of them opted for absorption by the South. The regime's concerns with reform are not altogether irrational.

IMPLICATIONS

Marble: *Since the election of President Obama—who promised dialogue with U.S. enemies—North Korea has undertaken a number of provocative actions: missile and nuclear tests, probable involvement in the sinking of the* Cheonan*, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Are these related in any way to the succession?*

Pinkston: It is widely believed that Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008, and it is plausible that his illness influenced the chilly reception the Obama administration received from Pyongyang. Both internal political dynamics and a desire to display resolve could have pushed toward a harder line. But the provocations of 2010 appear more directly related to the succession, and in disturbing ways. The 1953 Korean War armistice did not delimit an inter-Korean maritime boundary. The Northern Limit Line in the Yellow (or West) Sea was drawn unilaterally and has been the site of bloody confrontations for decades.[2] The 2010 attacks against the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island served two internal political purposes: revenge for previous military defeats in the area that would bolster military morale; and the opportunity for the regime to build a narrative around Kim Jong-un's military leadership. The attacks were also a vivid signal to any potential internal challenger that the Kim family is willing to run incredible risks to stay in power.

Marble: *Relations with South Korea have been particularly strained since the election of Lee Myung-bak in 2007. Where is South Korean policy going?*

Haggard: Although economic issues played into the election, it was also a referendum on the Sunshine Policy of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments. A majority of the South Korean electorate believed that these policies yielded little fruit, despite their incredible generosity. The core of the new government's strategy was a subtle but important change in the conception of reciprocity. The Kim and Roh governments believed that wide-ranging

2 See International Crisis Group, "North Korea: The Risks of War in the Yellow Sea," Asia Report, no. 198, December 23, 2010.

engagement would ultimately yield benefits, even in the absence of an explicit *quid pro quo*. The Lee government, by contrast, demanded progress on the nuclear question prior to providing assistance. In the absence of such progress, the Lee administration has tried to shift the focus of South Korean foreign policy away from an all-consuming preoccupation with the North to a variety of other global and regional issues; South Korea's hosting of the group of twenty (G-20) was an example.

Pinkston: The DPRK reacted with extreme vitriol to this new approach, in part because of the loss of food and fertilizer aid. The sinking of the *Cheonan* and the attack on Yeonpyeong Island were the culmination of this strategy to discredit the Lee government's approach. But those actions did not have the intended effect. The South Korean public was polarized over the sinking of the *Cheonan*; opposition forces did not believe the government's case against the DPRK and thought that Lee was manipulating the issue for political gain. But the shelling of Yeonpyeong rallied some support for the president, and sympathy for engagement once again fell.

The government performed badly in four by-elections in April of this year, which the opposition has interpreted as repudiation of the ruling party's overall policy direction. However, emotions in the South are still raw after the 2010 provocations. Given that South Korean presidents can only serve one five-year term, the opportunities for a fundamental change in course are narrowing. The presidential election is not until December 2012, but National Assembly elections are not concurrent and all 299 seats will be contested next April. The DPRK leadership saw the collapse of proposed deals at the end of the Clinton and Roh administrations, so they are unlikely to buy into a "grand bargain" at the end of the Lee government, particularly when leadership changes will be looming in China and the United States will be facing a presidential election.

Haggard: Some have argued that South Korean political dynamics have hamstrung U.S. policy. The Lee government has demanded an apology for the sinking of the *Cheonan* and attacks on Yeonpyeong Island, making it difficult for the United States to take the initiative ahead of its ally. But U.S. skepticism antedates the events of 2010. The missile and nuclear tests of 2009 angered the Obama administration's North Korea policy team and generated the strategy of "strategic patience." This policy rests on broad multilateral sanctions, aimed in part at limiting North Korea's proliferation activities, and a willingness to wait until North Korea took the requisite steps to resume talks. This policy has not worked, in the sense of yielding North Korean concessions. It may

be worthwhile to test Pyongyang's intentions by reiterating more forcefully our willingness to resume the six-party talks. But if North Korea remains committed to keeping its nuclear weapons—which most analysts now believe to be the case—talks are not likely to be productive.

Marble: *China is clearly a strategic actor in this equation. What interests does Beijing have with respect to North Korea's political transition?*

Pinkston: China has its own internal divisions on North Korea policy. On the one hand, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and conservatives value North Korea as a buffer state. Nostalgic ideological and wartime commitments also cannot be ruled out. Economic interests—particularly in northeast China—are seeking to lock up investment deals and trade concessions. On the other hand, there are Chinese analysts who see North Korea as an anachronism and even a potential threat to core Chinese interests. North Korean provocations only strengthen strategic ties among Japan, South Korea, and the United States, as recent military exercises in the Yellow Sea demonstrate.

But in the end the Chinese are most concerned about stability on their border, including the risk of a flood of refugees. Beijing is unlikely to exert strong pressure to bring North Korea around. Moreover, China takes a much longer view and appears to believe that opening and reform are inevitable. If that is the case, the most effective policy is long-run engagement with North Korea on China's terms. In effect, China is pursuing its own variant of the Sunshine Policy, deepening North Korea's dependence on China in the process.

Marble: *What are the prospects—if any—for a revival of the six-party talks?*

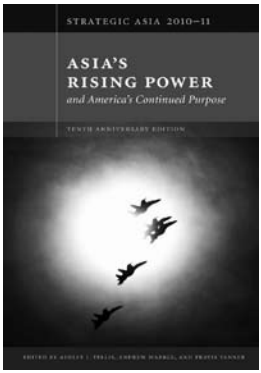
Haggard: This question can be broken into two parts: the chances that the talks will resume; and the question of whether they will lead anywhere even if they do recommence. China has proposed an intricate three-step dance that includes a North-South initiative, bilateral talks with the United States, and then a reconvening of the multilateral talks. But the North has shown little willingness to reconcile with the South. The United States is more willing to put concessions on the table than its critics believe; food aid is an example. But the administration is skeptical about sitting down for talks in the absence of any sign that they will be meaningful.

Marble: *In the end, policy seems to hinge on the question of whether North Korea is prepared to give up its nuclear weapons and cease proliferation activities. What is your judgment on that core question?*

Pinkston: The North Korean government and media have been clear: the DPRK has no intention of giving up its nuclear capabilities unless the whole Korean Peninsula is denuclearized and the United States abandons its "hostile policy" against the DPRK. The sticking point is that Pyongyang defines "denuclearization" as the termination of U.S. extended deterrence for Washington's Northeast Asian allies, something that is not only politically infeasible but physically impossible as long as the United States maintains a strategic nuclear capability. The North has also long argued that the United States' "hostile policy" is manifest in the stationing of troops in the South, which it contends should be withdrawn. Of course, these could well be bargaining positions. But if these views are firmly held, it is hard to see how any security assurance Washington might offer would be credible.

Marble: *Given the confluence of domestic politics in North Korea and the shift toward a harder line in the United States, South Korea, and Japan, is it possible that war could break out?*

Pinkston: The costs of war are unacceptable to all sides. Given the overwhelming preponderance of U.S. and South Korean force, the deterrent should be stable. But in 2010 the North demonstrated a willingness to take serious risks; moreover, Pyongyang is very skillful at calculating provocations that will not generate strong responses. Many in the South now relish the opportunity to use the next *Cheonan* or Yeonpyeong Island incident to punish North Korea militarily and end the decades-long cycle of provocations. Pyongyang may also believe that its nuclear capability provides it more latitude to take risks. The risk of all-out war remains small, but the possibility of inadvertent escalation is as high as it has been for some time. ◈



STRATEGIC ASIA 2010–11

ASIA'S RISING POWER

and America's Continued Purpose

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